

Reborn On Mars II – The Iblis

By Sunao Yoshida

Сканирование и правка: Вэлин.
Об опечатках и проч. сообщайте.

The Queen's Summer

The cardinal, who was expected to pass by soon, was rumored to be an astounding beauty.

The route she was to travel was nearly as noisy as a festival, what with the idle spectators trying to catch a glimpse of the rarely seen high-ranking Vatican official, the souvenir sellers who targeted them, and the police squadrons lined up in tight rows all the way to the Vatican's embassy.

Even if it hadn't been midday, spending August in Carthage was no different than sitting at the bottom of a kettle in hell. And this year, Carthage was supposed to be hit by sandstorms in August, to boot. When the Sahara covered them with dust clouds every day, and even the famed streets of Carthage seemed to have yellowed, the Bedouins called it Queen's Summer.

As he emptied a bottle of Carthage wine cold enough to make his teeth ache, Pietro Borromini complained in an ill-natured voice, "Oh, dear. Everybody's curious, aren't they?"

A native of Rome, where Vatican personnel were a dime a dozen, he didn't understand people who purposefully went out in this kind of heat to see a mere cardinal. It was more his style to languidly idle away the afternoon with his large body comfortably planted in an air-conditioned hotel's deserted bar. So, that's exactly what he did. As he peered through the window to watch the crowd enduring the sunlight, he felt truly good.

"Um, may I sit next to you?" asked a girl.

Borromini tilted his head, wrenching his thick neck so he could see the small figure before him, her scent tinged with light perfume. From beneath her brunette hair, she gazed down at the big man, her flashing blue eyes shining like lapis lazuli.

"Of course, have a seat. Bartender, get this *signorina* a glass," Borromini ordered.

She's sixteen, maybe seventeen? Borromini licked his lips, appraising the girl as she sat down. Her looks were just to his liking – her rather small chest hinted that she was barely out of childhood.

"Please. It's my wine, but have some if you like," Borromini invited.

"Th-thank you," the girl replied.

She spoke perfect Carthaginian, but with her fair-skinned face, she looked like she was from Albion or some Western country. Judging by her low-cut, gaudy dress, she was unmistakably a prostitute, but it was obvious from her clumsy demeanor and the awkwardness of her coquettish smile that she hadn't been in this business for long. Borromini thought her profile was exquisite, and her manners were neat and tidy as she raised the glass to her mouth with embarrassment.

"I like you," Borromini said suddenly.

"Hmm?" asked the girl. She blinked as if surprised.

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

While pouring a second drink into her glass, Borromini shrugged his wide shoulders. "Ah, no, it was nothing. I was going to ask you if you liked that wine. It's the most expensive one, called 'Queen's Tears,'" Borromini exclaimed.

"Y-yes. It's delicious — very nice," she replied.

As he watched the girl answer his question with such an innocent smile, Borromini was rapidly losing his self-control. *This girl is a real gem.*

"Yes. If it's all right, won't you come to my room after we finish here?" asked Borromini, deliberately pulling out his wallet to attract the girl's eye. Inside was a thick sheaf of bills. If she were a prostitute, as he'd suspected, then surely she'd go along with his plan — but he still shouldn't be terribly blunt about it. "There's some white wine I brought from Rome in my room. Won't you have a glass to compare with this?" asked Borromini.

"Rome? You came from Rome, *signore*?" she inquired.

Borromini nodded affably to the girl, whose eyes widened.

"Yes, I left on a bit of business. The truth is that I'm a programmer," Borromini explained.

"Oh? So, you can operate an ancient computer?" asked the girl. She reverently beamed at the big man, who struck his sturdy chest and nodded.

"Do you work for the government then?" asked the girl.

"No, I work for a private client. It's very demanding work — I'm always crawling around in the darkness of underground sewers ---- " sighed Borromini.

"Sewers? Is your client a plumber or something?" asked the girl.

"A magic-user," Borromini laughed.

The girl blinked her big eyes doubtfully.

He winked at her and bluffed confidently, "The magic-user asked me to make sandstorms. But I finished that project this morning, so now I'm enjoying a long-awaited vacation."

"A magic-user asked you to make sandstorms in the sewers?" the girl repeated, punctuating each word with a careful pause. "Is that some kind of metaphor?" asked the girl.

"Well, it would take too long to explain." Borromini laughed impatiently, his silver-ringed left hand softly covering the girl's delicate hand. Her shoulders tensed for a moment, but when she didn't seem to register shock or repulsion beyond that, the programmer slid their paired hands down across her hip.

"Come to my room. I'll explain it to you more thoroughly there. After that, I have all kinds of things to ask you, too," Borromini breathed into her ear.

"Ah . . . um . . . *Signore*, before that . . ." the girl whispered in a trembling voice, "that man over there would like to hear the details of your business, too." She pointed at a tall, shadowy man standing at the entrance of the bar.

"You're former Vatican Treasury Department employee Doctor Pietro Borromini, aren't you?" asked the stranger, his quiet voice echoing in the deserted bar. The young man stepped forward. He was wearing a cassock, and his head was crowned with brilliant silver hair. He laughed thinly and pushed his round glasses up higher on his nose. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Abel Nightroad, and I've come from the Vatican Foreign Affairs Special Detachment AX. Doctor Borromini, you already know why I interrupted, don't you?" Abel inquired.

"AX?" shouted Borromini. His scream was pitiful—but for a man his size, his speed was praiseworthy: He quickly pulled the prostitute in front of him, using her as a shield, and then he swiftly thrust a gun he'd had hidden in his bag at her temple.

"Don't move, Father!" Borromini demanded.

The bar staff hurriedly dropped down under the tables.

"If you move even a little, I'll kill this girl!" roared Borromini.

However, the priest remained calm. "Oh, dear. The former wit of the Vatican has become so shamefully stupid." Abel drew his familiar percussion revolver, muttering to nobody, "Nevertheless, I'm glad I took out insurance after all. Esther, if you please . . ."

"Yes," Esther calmly replied. Instantly, the girl's body sank to the floor.

"What?" Borromini's eyes opened wide in shock. His legs were swept out from under him by a strong kick, and he fell like a ton of bricks.

"Don't move!" cried Esther.

As she posed heroically, the girl's hands gripped a shotgun, which she'd kept hidden under her skirt, strapped to her thigh. The gun had a short range, but it was superior at shooting all kinds of bullets according to a user's need: scattershot, single bullets, rubber bullets, or gas bombs.

While fixing her aim with well-trained movements, the red-haired girl warned Borromini again: "I'm Esther Blanchett of the Foreign Affairs Investigation Department. Doctor Borromini, you are under arrest in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The charge is violation of church employment regulations. Last month, when you were dismissed from the Treasury Department, we suspected that you'd duplicated or stolen software with which you were entrusted. Please place both hands on your head and stand up slowly!" Esther ordered.

"Heh heh, that was a cinch." Although he hadn't actually done anything except ask a few questions, the silver-haired priest chuckled with self-importance as he pushed up his glasses again. "Well, this wasn't too much work to accomplish before breakfast," remarked Abel.

"Father, please boast and swagger later. Quick, put the handcuffs on him," Esther commanded. Fidgeting in annoyance, the redheaded girl wiped deep red lipstick off her mouth with the back of her empty hand. "Hurry. I can't stand to be in this slutty outfit for one more second."

"Yes, yes. Wait just a moment. Let's see, the handcuffs . . . where I did I — huh?" The priest's hands were rummaging through his pockets. He'd pulled out a half-eaten chocolate bar, a balloon with a hole in it, one slipper, and a few other such things from his cassock pockets. Then he stopped. He timidly spread out a crumpled scrap of paper before emitting a ghastly scream. "What! This is a receipt from a previous business trip? Oh, no! I missed including it on last month's expense report. If I visit Accounting as soon as I get back, will they still accept it?" asked Abel.

"I don't know, Father! Why do you always wait until the last minute to do your paperwork — F-Father!" cried Esther.

Her warning was just a second too late: The giant on the floor sprang up and pinned the unlucky priest from behind.

"Stay where you are, little girl!" demanded Borromini. A gunshot rang out, and the window facing the street broke into pieces. Turning the stolen percussion revolver around, Borromini shouted, "If you don't want me to break the priest's neck, stay there!"

"Oh, God, could you wring my neck faster somehow?" Abel moaned in pain, his face turning a dangerous blue as he slowly suffocated.

With the shotgun still in hand, Esther clucked her tongue. "It's no use struggling, Borromini! Let go of the priest!"

"Shut up! You behave yourself!" Borromini hollered as he fired another shot at the ceiling.

Esther shielded her head from the pieces of chandelier that rained down.

Meanwhile, Borromini jumped into the street through the broken window. Of course, he took the priest with him. Elbowing his way through the noisy assembly, he tried to escape in the crowd.

"W-wait!" Esther hurried after them, but she couldn't pass through the bustling crowd as easily as the two large men. Finding herself in such a dismal situation, the nun wanted to despair.

Then, from out of nowhere, Tres' flat, toneless voice echoed. "What are you doing there, Father Nightroad?" If a congealed lump of iron could speak, it might have used such a deadpan tone.

Borromini froze, intimidated by Tres' complete lack of emotion.

The android priest, who wore his black cassock buttoned up tight, indifferently repeated his question, taking no notice of his endangered colleague or the gun in Borromini's hand.

"This is a Special Police zone, Father Nightroad. What are you doing here?"

"H-having my neck wrung... H-hi, Tres. What a coincidence... m-meeting you h-here," Abel spit out in a slowly weakening voice. "Ha ha, the situation is as you see ... Uh, Tres, what are *you* doing here?" asked Abel.

"I'm on duty," replied the short priest, Vatican Foreign Affairs Department AX Agent Gunslinger, also known as Father Tres Iqus. He looked down at his dying colleague with chilling indifference. "In three hundred and forty seconds, the Duchess of Milan's car will pass through here. I've confirmed its defenses."

"Well, thanks for that . . . guh." Abel coughed.

"Shut up! Stop ignoring me and talking nonsense!" Borromini yelled with irritation. His gun barrel left Abel's temple and pointed at the other priest. "Hey, you! If you don't leave, I'll kill you!"

"Be careful! Father Tres, please go!" Esther cried out.

The short priest didn't move at all, though. Instead, he said, "Confirmed: Current situation's degree of danger is minimal. One enemy. Combat open."

Gunfire rumbled. A hoarse scream followed immediately afterward: "Eek!" shouted Borromini.

A painful shock with force equivalent to a charging buffalo struck the gun grasped in Borromini's hand. And before that gun had finished rolling across the cobblestones, Tres advanced. The android grasped his large, smoking pistol.

"Eek! S-stay away!" Borromini cried. He brandished his fist, but his attacker's shadow disappeared right before his eyes.

"You're one point nine seconds too late," Tres declared.

In a flash, the nape of Borromini's neck was struck directly by a vicious karate chop. Its nerve plexus paralyzed as if he'd been vivisected, his giant body crumpled onto the cobblestones. From underneath him came a scream and a sound like a frog being squashed, but nobody paid attention.

"Let's see," Esther assessed. Not even *two* seconds had elapsed. Esther had been watching the action, aghast — when she'd finally come to herself, everything already was over.

"Urn, Father Tres?"

The android holstered his gun without the slightest concern, but he turned around when Esther called his name. His eyes held a strange light.

He looked exactly the same as when Esther first had met him half a year ago at her old home. "It's been a long time," she said, "Do you remember me? I'm — "

"Sister Esther Blanchett. I remember you." Tres nodded coldly. "If the personnel data I received is correct, you were appointed a staff member with Vatican Foreign Affairs on February twentieth of this year, one hundred sixty days ago. Two hundred five hours ago, you finished your five-month special training course. You were assigned to Investigations — currently, as support personnel for Father Nightroad, who is in charge of arresting an

escaped former member of the Vatican Treasury. You were dispatched to Carthage. If my data is defective, please correct it."

"No, it's as you say ... Although, incidentally, that former member you were talking about is lying there," Esther explained.

"I understand the situation," Tres acknowledged. Nodding casually, he grabbed the unconscious Borromini by the collar. With strength exceeding what one would expect from his short stature, the android tossed the programmer's body toward the nun. "I recommend you take him to the embassy while he's still unconscious."

"Th-thank you!" Esther replied.

Tres turned on his heel at once, walking away with rhythmic steps and disappearing beyond the edge of the crowd.

With an appreciative look, Esther watched him go.

"What is the meaning of this?"

She startled. The police typically assigned to guard the area were now surrounding them. After noticing the disturbance, they'd come running up with their swords drawn. Their suspicious looks pierced Esther, raking over her unladylike clothes.

Esther nervously hiked up a shoulder strap that had slipped down. "Um, I'm not really a suspicious person." Pulling her ID out from under her skirt, she hurriedly explained: "I'm Esther Blanchett. I'm a Vatican Foreign Affairs employee. I was in pursuit of a criminal in that hotel . . . Ah, this is my Carthage government proof of permission."

After confirming her documents carefully—multiple times, even—the policemen finally nodded their understanding. They probably had seen her and Tres talking a little while ago, too, helping them recognize that she wasn't violent. Their attitudes visibly softened.

She was relieved when the police dropped their suspicious gazes to the cobblestones.

"Uh, Sister—this here belong to you?" asked the policeman.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, oh God, I do want to walk level sometimes," moaned Abel. Still squashed against the cobblestones, his eyes were rolled up into his head, the whites showing.

Although some little boys had crept up to him and were poking the priest with a stick for fun, there was absolutely no sign that Abel would react, except to mutter some nonsense.

"Is this person an acquaintance of yours, too?" nudged the policeman.

"Let's see, um, that is . . ." Esther shook her head decisively. "No, I have absolutely no idea who he is!"

The Visitor's Evening

Believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee.

—Jeremiah 12:6

I

"Oh, no! How did it become so late already?" Esther worried. By the time she'd showered and changed into her habit, it was ten o'clock. Because the sound of the typewriter had seemed off to her, she'd unwittingly taken extra time to write up her report. Seeing as this was a Vatican embassy—albeit temporarily so—she'd taken extra care with the equipment. Tonight, the Minister of Vatican Foreign Affairs was visiting Carthage, where he would host a party, bringing all the important people of the city to this very embassy.

As soon as Esther had hastily arranged her wet hair, she ran down to the great hall, arriving just as the guest of honor, the governor of Carthage, was ending his long, boring greeting.

With relief, the important people's fancifully dressed wives and the bishops of the city's churches were calling for a toast, while the common embassy personnel circulated among them to attend to their needs.

"Let's see here . . . Can't I help with something?" Esther asked.

The embassy staff had taken good care of her during her business trip, and Esther wanted to return the favor. She wondered if the catering area would be a safe place to start. Craning her neck, she looked for the kitchen.

"Hey, aren't you Esther?" asked Abel. With sparkling eyes the color of a winter lake, he smiled at the nun. "What's the matter? Why are you looking around? Did you drop your purse?"

"No! What are *you* doing here, Father Nightroad?" asked Esther.

Despite the heat, he was wearing extra clothing, having draped a cape over his soiled cassock.

Esther gazed suspiciously at the priest, who glibly smiled as he hoisted a tray crammed with food in his right hand.

"I thought you were going to spend the night sleeping in your room after you came back from the holding cells." Esther asked while eyeing the food.

"Yes, but then this good smell wafted into my room, and I woke up! This is my best opportunity to attend a party, and I'm going to stuff myself full of food while I can. Incidentally, look: I'm prepared for takeout. It's perfect! Heh heh heh," chuckled Able, presenting his lunchbox to Esther before dumping the tray of food inside.

She wondered what was so funny about that, but she said nothing. Whenever she spoke to this man, it made her head hurt. Holding her tongue, Esther turned on her heel and made toward the kitchen.

Unfortunately, the gangly priest staggered unsteadily after her. "Ah, will you take me with you, Esther? I'm recuperating. I'll guide you to the most delicious food. I've been investigating it thoroughly. This area is already like my own conquered territory! Shall we start with the roast beef over there?" Abel asked.

"I didn't come to eat! I feel awkward doing nothing but standing around as a guest, so I thought I'd help in the kitchen. That's the only reason I came down," Esther explained.

"What? Kitchen? Oh, I didn't think to try that method!" Abel exclaimed, clapping with pleasure.

Esther didn't know what he was talking about, nor was she going to ask him to explain himself. In fact, she hoped he'd go somewhere to look for more food. "About that, Father ... If you don't mind, could you please be on your way? As you can see, I'm busy."

"Hmm? Well, may I come into the kitchen? I'll do it, too—that helping thing . . . Hey, after all: 'Those who don't work shouldn't eat,'" quoted Abel.

The priest folio-wed her, shamelessly babbling at her as she shooed him away with her hands. In the end, though, Esther gave in, thinking that even someone as scatterbrained as Abel could wash dishes at least. Having abandoned the idea of ditching him, Esther sighed. Then, a thought occurred to her. "It's a plot to get your hands on the food while pretending to help!" cried Esther.

"What? Ha ha ha, no. Impossible," Abel muttered, staring at her finger, which was pointing right between his eyes. "Am I not a humble church worker? Am I not a servant of God? Would I do such a wretched thing as sneaking snacks under the guise of helping? It's rude to even suggest it!"

"Then why are you averting your eyes and making excuses — *and* talking in a monotone?" Esther challenged.

"Now that you mention it, in the Bible, there's that quote: 'Ulterior motives are more and more insincere.' Yes, I'm certain that was in the Acts of the Apostles, wasn't it?" asked Abel.

"Please stop making up dubious quotes!" Esther cried, placing both hands on her hips and launching into a sermon. She glared up at Abel, who was a good two heads taller than her.

"All right, if it's going to be like this, today I will say it: Father Abel, why are you always so —"

"Father Nightroad, you're back already?" A sweet voice interrupted the girl's lecture. A slender form suddenly was standing next to them. "I heard you were sleeping in the holding cells tonight — when did you get out?" asked Caterina.

"Caterina, good evening," Abel remarked. Turning to face her, Abel smiled with a fresh face.

Esther, however, turned pale and hurriedly bowed her head. "Your Eminence, Cardinal Sforza!"

Accompanied by nuns, the cardinal stood beside them, a monocle and an elegant smile¹ on her beautiful face. She wore a scarlet vestment with gold crosses embroidered on it. Even in the Vatican, such sacred vestments were only for cardinals, the highest-ranking officials besides the Pope himself.

"I heard about the incident at noon, Father Nightroad. It appears that I'll be treated to another amusing report." The Duchess of Milan, Cardinal Caterina Sforza, was a talented woman who controlled the diplomatic matters of the Vatican as Minister of Foreign Affairs. She smiled at the priest as he scratched his head awkwardly, embarrassed.

Then, suddenly, she switched her gaze to the girl, who stood stiff and formal by Abel's side. "Ah! You're Sister Esther, aren't you? I remember the incident in Istavan. Congratulations on your success with your work. Father Tres praised your splendid efficiency."

"N-no, that's . . . that's praise I don't deserve, Your Eminence!" Esther exclaimed. She wondered what Father Tres had reported to his superior. She felt self-conscious, worried that there'd been gross mismanagement that afternoon. She was so fervently ashamed, she flinched.

"It really was very dangerous. But Esther followed my example beautifully and managed all right," Abel interjected.

Such idiotic words destroyed the nun's timid humility.

With cockiness, the priest twirled a lamb kebab in one hand, proudly flaring his nostrils.

"Well, certainly Esther is very inexperienced, but it's okay. If she studies by my side for half a year, she can become a success. It's as if her life's struggles already are won, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha."

Esther silently fumed, her clenched fists shaking.

"I'm sorry, Sister Esther." The beautiful cardinal peered regretfully at the silent nun. "My deepest apologies for asking you to babysit such a character, but we're a bit shorthanded right now. Please, be patient a little while longer and stay with Abel," Caterina encouraged.

"N-no reason to apologize! I'm not worthy of such kindness," Esther replied.

As far as Esther knew, Caterina Sforza was an infinitely wise person, full of class. Her beauty and rank made her the closest thing to a goddess on Earth. To hear a plea from such a person . . . Suddenly, a thought flitted past the corners of Esther's mind. Something in Caterina's words snagged her heart.

"Now, Caterina," said Abel, "if I'm to understand what you're saying, are you misrepresenting me as a useless person?"

"Oh, aren't you one, though? I was sure you knew yourself," Caterina volleyed.

"What? You say such rude things without hesitation! And you're wrong. As you can see, I ..." Abel babbled awkwardly, but Caterina's eyes remained soft, and kind enough to make one doubt she was the shrewdest person in the Vatican, known as the "Woman of Steel" and feared both within her own nation and by many countries beyond,

Now that Esther thought about it, she really didn't know much about those two.

"I'm a Crusnik – a vampire who drinks the blood of vampires."

This young priest whom she'd met in her hometown also wore another, darker face.

"After all, you're ..."

What had the Marquis of Hungary been trying to say back then?

How much did Cardinal Sforza know about this priest?

"Excuse my interrupting your conversation, Your Eminence Sforza," a polite voice called out. The embassy worker who hastily approached Caterina with a memo was respectful, but rather lacking in warmth. "A message has come in for Your Eminence from Rome. It's been sent to your bedroom, so please head there at once," said the man.

"Message? Unfortunately, I can't get away now. Tell them to resend it later," Caterina stated.

The embassy worker looked troubled at Caterina's reply. "No, that is – the sender is the Minister of the Inquisition," said the man.

"Minister of the Inquisition? You mean Cardinal Medici?" asked Caterina, frowning. Francesco di Medici was her half brother, and he controlled the Vatican's internal administration. "Understood. I really can't refuse something so important. Forgive me, Sister Esther. I'm sorry to end our conversation, but is it all right if I leave my seat for a little while?" asked Caterina.

"Of course! Please, don't mind me!" Esther said.

Caterina offered a gentle smile to the rigid young nun, lightly patting her on the shoulder. "Then, we'll talk again later. Father Nighthead, please stuff yourself as much as possible. When we return to Rome, we'll be busy again, and you won't have time to laze about, eating your fill," Caterina teased.

"Ah, can I eat your share, too?" asked Abel.

"That's fine. After all, I don't want to be known as a boss who deprives her underlings of their bonuses." After cracking that rare joke, the beautiful woman followed the embassy worker outside.

With a mixture of awe and admiration, Esther watched the cardinal's slender form retreat.

"Dear me, Caterina's in for it now," Abel mused. Without even pretending to care about the complexity of Esther's heart, the silver-haired priest stood by her side, shaking his head frivolously. As he continued to transfer the cuisine on the table into his lunchbox, he rudely spoke with his mouth full: "Consider, aren't the common lords beginning to distrust the Vatican because our troops were dispatched to Istavan? And the nobles in this city are especially upset, because it's only a stone's throw away from the Empire, yet it's traditionally been a free city. They must be nervous about when it will be their turn to be invaded. So, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is traveling around, personally reassuring them of our good will. Isn't that great?" asked Abel.

"You speak very informally with Her Eminence," Esther remarked.

The priest, his cheeks stuffed with mutton couscous, answered in a hard-to-hear voice.

"Huh?" Once he finished swallowing what was in his mouth, he tried again, "What did you just say, Esther?"

"I said that you're very good friends with Her Eminence Sforza, right?"

Unaware of the sting in the nun's voice, Abel's gaze turned distant and nostalgic. "Yeah, well, that's because we've known each other a long time. We first met twelve or thirteen years ago ... that was the year she skipped ahead and enrolled in graduate school. I think Caterina was a little younger than you are now. What was she, fourteen, fifteen? At any rate – where are you going, Esther?"

Esther stormed away in the middle of the conversation.

"If you're going to the kitchen, I'll go, too." He ran up to her.

"Don't follow me!" Esther ordered. Her sharp tone surprised even herself. She shook the priest's hand off her shoulder and spat out cruelly, "Enough. Father, please eat, or reminisce, or *whatever* over there!"

"Huh?" Abel's eyes widened with shock at the girl's sudden change in attitude. It was no wonder he was surprised – even Esther herself didn't know why she was this indignant.

"Urn, Esther, what are you so angry about?" asked Abel.

"I'm not angry!" Esther screamed. Still not knowing what was wrong with her, Esther turned her back on him. She didn't like herself getting upset for no reason; her stomach felt sick over the way she was acting. "Are you telling me I'm angry? It's very unpleasant to be told I'm angry when I'm not!"

"No, actually . . . um, I ... did I do something to make you angry? I can think of, well, all kinds of things. At any rate, I apologize if I hurt your feelings. I'm apologizing, so will you please be in a little bit of a better mood now? Why don't you have a bite to eat? Aren't the hamburgers here simply delicious?" Abel asked.

"I'm busy," Esther sighed. Although it was hardly his fault, the priest's apology made Esther excessively vexed. Turning away cruelly, she began to walk quickly. "I have a lot of work to do, Father. I don't have time to chitchat with you."

"Ah, where are you going? Isn't the kitchen that way?" asked Abel.

Esther noticed that she was walking in the opposite direction of the kitchen. However, she couldn't change direction now; it was too late. "I ... I'm going to go check on Borromini!" Esther kept walking straight ahead. "I'll confirm that he's behaving himself. Besides, I have to ask him what he was doing in this city," said Esther.

"Um, that's, I ..." Abel stuttered.

"I'm saying that I will go! Father, please stay here. In a little while, you can resume your talk with Her Eminence. You like her, don't you? Talk to Her Eminence!" Esther stated, baffled by her own babble. Glaring at Abel's shocked expression, Esther started to cry for some reason. She hurriedly averted her eyes. "At any rate, I'll go. Please don't come with me!"

Throwing all her strength into it, she fled the party hall.

II

The dense evening was overflowing with sweet scents: jasmine, rose, lemon, bougainvillea, mimosa, hibiscus . . . Even in the seemingly eternal darkness of night, the flowers proudly celebrated their existence during their brief lifetimes.

After the sun went down, the scorching heat of the desert faded away, the temperature of the city quickly dropping. A Mediterranean breeze blew through the streets, comfortably brushing past Esther's flushed skin and softening the hard daytime expressions of the people who were flooding the intricate marketplace.

"Huh? It's not this hallway after all. So, where is this place, anyway?" a puzzled Esther mumbled to herself as she gazed down at the Medina crowd from the mazelike corridor where she stood. She was completely lost. She couldn't remember which way led to the room where Borromini was confined, nor how to get back to the party hall. Why was the embassy this large, in any case? /

"Somehow, I've gotten hungry," she murmured. She'd been walking around all day without anything to eat since breakfast. Attempting to soothe her growling stomach, Esther walked listlessly to the handrail.

Carthage at night had an illusive beauty.

The corner the Vatican embassy occupied was inside the old Medina district. The spired Grand Cathedral, which was said to have been a pagan temple before the Armageddon, stood towering in the north. Below, the marketplace took up a row of cramped buildings, with shops that were still doing business late at night. The smell of oranges wafted on the wind, intermingling with the scents of the perfume market nearby. And in this district famous for its precious metals, the metalwork sparkled and *dazzled* in the moonlight. To Esther, who'd been born in a northern country, it all looked like a scene from a fairytale; she didn't really understand what she was doing in this fairytale, though.

When she'd lived in Istavan, she'd never even dreamed of southern countries like this one. As she'd fought for the people of her city, she'd believed without a doubt that she'd be buried there. Less than a year had passed since those days, though, and here she was, wandering alone through the maze of a city across the sea, hundreds of miles away from her hometown.

"I want to go home," whispered Esther. She peered up at the night sky, gazing up at the two moons floating high above. Even if she were to go home, she had no family left there—they'd all been killed. In that final fight, the bishop, the nuns, and a large number of Partisan friends had died, along with the Marquis of Hungary.

She didn't understand why they'd had to die. And so Esther had gone on a journey, searching for an answer. She'd thought she could avenge them once she knew the reason their lives had been stolen from them—but she had no idea what she was doing here at this particular moment.

"Sister Esther Blanchett, what are you doing here?" Tres asked, popping out of nowhere.

Esther screamed. She hurriedly turned around to see Father Tres Iqus standing before her, dressed in a flawless cassock.

Esther hurriedly curtsied to the AX agent. "Good evening, Father Tres. Um, what are you doing in a place like this?" she countered.

"I'm on interior patrol. Request you input your answer, Sister Esther Blanchett. What are you doing here?" asked Tres.

"Well, the truth is that I'm lost," Esther admitted, feeling like a complete fool. She lowered her blushing face. "I thought I'd go to the room where the former programmer is confined, but, um, I don't know where that is."

Tres said nothing, whereas any other person would've laughed out loud. Instead of ridiculing the girl, the mechanical doll took in this information, his handsomely crafted face remaining expressionless. "I've comprehended your situation. I'll guide you to the room. I recommend you accompany me."

"Oh no, I don't mean to cause you any trouble."

"Sister Esther Blanchett, based on Duty Regulation Article Six—as well as Article Nine, Paragraph Three and Article Eighty, Paragraph One, Rule Eight—members of the Vatican Foreign Affairs Department owe their comrades support on a level that does not interfere

with their current duties. This does not interfere, so I will lead you. Accompany me," Tres said.

"Th-thank you!" Esther blurted as the short priest began walking briskly. She hurriedly followed after him, explaining, "It's a big building, and it's hard to tell the corridors apart. There are so many stairs!"

"Affirmative. This building originally was constructed as a governor's palace, back in ancient times. It was intentionally designed with a complexity that would confuse invaders," Tres explained. This man—who was now all machine, aside from his brainstem and part of his brain—was always a calm and accurate professional, and that was the biggest difference between the HC-3X and everyone else, including his fellow priests.

"Um, Father Tres?" Esther dared to open her mouth as he continued walking ahead. "May I ask you one thing?"

"Affirmative. Ask what question you please; however, I cannot promise an answer."

"That's fine. The truth is that I want to ask a little bit about Father Abel. I don't know much about him," Esther began. He was a mystery that had been bothering her all day—no, for the past half year.

"I'm a Crusnik, a vampire that sucks the blood of vampires."

In Istavan, Abel had become a man with an overwhelming presence.

"I'm your friend."

And he'd seemed infinitely reliable.

The priest's behavior had accounted for more than half the reason Esther had abandoned her homeland and gone to Rome. When she'd been by his side, she'd felt that he would guide her to the answers she was seeking. But...

"Since we've met again here, Father Nightroad hasn't told me anything about himself. I don't know if he's playing dumb or what, but he's always being so stupid! Please, Father Tres tell me: What kind of person is Father Abel?"

"I can't answer that question, Sister Esther Blanchett." He set his quiet eyes on the girl's face, shaking his head. "You aren't qualified to access data concerning agents. Accordingly, I can't answer."

"No, that's fine. Sorry for asking something so strange," Esther apologized.

AX Agents, who reported to Caterina, were the highest secret service within the Foreign Affairs Department, never mind the Vatican. It was common for temporary workers like Esther to be totally ignorant of their existence. Esther had only dared ask such a thing because she wanted to spew at someone else about what had been troubling her heart for a while.

"Here's the thing I don't understand: Why does a person who can be so strong when he puts his mind to it act like he does the rest of the time? Why?"

"That's an important matter that you should ask him about, Sister Esther Blanchett," the android priest pointed out, his heavy footsteps echoing. "I recommend you ask Father Nightroad directly."

"Well, I've asked him before. 'Why don't you work seriously?' I asked. And he wouldn't answer. He simply dodged the question." Esther shook her head sadly. She wondered if he didn't trust her enough to tell her. He was so informal with Cardinal Sforza . . . maybe Esther made him uncomfortable.

"We've arrived." Tres' cold voice interrupted Esther's rambling thoughts. "This is your destination. Confirm." He pointed at a familiar iron door.

Esther remembered the plain crest engraved on the knob. "It certainly was this room. Um, thank you very much, Father Tres."

"No need to thank me. I just acted in accordance with duty regulations," he replied.

"Yes, but . . . thanks anyway."

With his glass eyes, Tres silently regarded the nun's bowed head. Then, he turned and began walking back toward the corridors again.

After bowing her head once more at his retreating figure, Esther extended her hand to open the door, wondering if their giant prisoner was behaving himself. The instant her fingers touched the knob, Esther screamed, "Hot!" She pulled her hand back, pain radiating through her fingers. "What is this?" Esther's eyes bulged. The skin on her fingertips had turned red and was peeling off.

Hearing her scream, Tres turned around in the corridor. "What's wrong, Sister Esther Blanchett?" he asked.

"The knob! The knob is extremely hot. What could it be?" Esther asked.

"Move aside." The priest hastily returned and pushed her out of the way. When he grasped the knob, a charred smell rose from his smoking palm. "Certainly, the temperature is rising. Sister Esther Blanchett, when you took the suspect into custody, did you lock the door?"

"Of course. Look, the key is here. I'm certain that I locked it properly when I came out – ah! Um, could it be unlocked?"

"Affirmative," Tres said as he swiftly drew his handgun. "After you detained the suspect, someone infiltrated this room from the outside."

With the biggest handgun in the world – a Jericho M13 Deus Irae – hefted in both hands, the priest kicked open the door with a burst of energy. With its hinges still attached, the iron plank flew off, revealing a dimly lit rectangle filled with billowing black smoke.

"What is this?" Esther asked. She subconsciously covered her nose in response to the smell of blood, burnt hair, and smoke. The source of the stench was lolling against the wall near the door. At first, Esther didn't recognize the form, which was carbonized almost to its constituent atoms. Then, she noticed a tasteless gold chain entangled in an arm that seemed to protrude like a branch from a fallen log.

"Impossible! Borromini?" Esther had to grit her teeth to avoid retching. Involuntarily backing up as she handled her rosary, she moaned, "*Deus, in nomine tuo saluum me fac.*" What in the world – what happened here?"

There was no fireplace in the wide stone storeroom, nor was there a window. The only object in the room was a lamp, which remained resting on the wall opposite the door – so it couldn't have been an accident.

"Look at this." As he squatted next to the corpse, Tres assumed the role of an autopsy surgeon, peeling back the charred and blackened skin on Borromini's neck. The skin sloughed off in large pieces, revealing bright pink flesh underneath, meaning that this corpse had been exposed to very high heat for a very short time.

But that wasn't what made Esther's eyes stare in wonder: Two small holes were gouged into the pink flesh. She had seen such a wound many times in her home city and on the training grounds.

"The mark of the vampire!" Esther's eyes wandered, and she stood up reflexively. The flickering light from the lamp suddenly seemed spooky. Borromini's blood had been sucked before he died! "There's a vampire nearby?"

There was no window in the room. The vampire that had killed Borromini and burned his corpse could still be inside the embassy.

Unfortunately, Esther's conjecture was proven in the most unlucky way: "It's overhead, Sister Esther Blanchett!"

It was then that the nun spotted the shadow that was standing upside down on the high ceiling directly above. She couldn't see its full face, which was covered by a deep hood,

but she eyed a sharp glint peeking out from its lips, which were opened in a crescent moon smile.

"Move!" the priest roared. If Tres' superhuman strength hadn't sent the frozen girl flying, her head already would've been blown off, her neck spouting blood.

The vampire's talons descended vertically — like falling raindrops — deeply gouging the floor where Esther had been standing half a second before.

"Rewriting permanent tactical memory from search mode to genocide mode — combat open."

Words such as "shock" and "dread" probably hadn't been programmed into the killing machine's understanding. Faster than the attacker could pull its claws out of the floor and regain its stance, ferocious blasts exploded in quick succession from Tres' extended hand. Gunfire shattered the stone wall. However, the bullets didn't pierce their prey's flesh, despite their Mach 1 initial muzzle velocity.

The instant the gunfire flashed, the vampire dodged, its long-tailed robe fluttering behind. Moving with a speed humans could not hope to achieve, the Methuselah gestured as if to extend its hand for a dance. A blue-white ball of light about the size of an apple floated above its palm. The monster's mouth was curved in a mocking smile.

The next instant, its wrist flexed, throwing the ball of light.

"Pyrogenetic reaction — avoid," Tres dictated.

Deliberately letting his feet slip as he tried to charge, Tres rolled himself sideways. When the ball of light skimmed his hair and collided with the wall behind him, it burst into flames.

Esther gaped. "Fire? Th-this is — "

"I recommend retreating to a safe area, Sister Esther Blanchett," Tres interjected. Brushing off some charred hairs, his unemotional eyes spotted another ball of fire in the man's hand.

"A vampire with the ability to make fire. Target identified as category F — an Efreet," Tres stated.

As if responding to the killing dolls voice, the ball of fire hummed.

There were numerous vampires with special abilities, such as Fairies, who performed high-speed flight, achieved by ventilation through the secondary lungs on their backs — or Doppelgangers, who freely changed their appearance by converting the cellular arrangement of their body's surface. Efreets, however, were extremely dangerous — and extremely rare.

Vampires of this special type had no sweat glands in their hands; instead, two kinds of secretion glands opened in their keratinized skin, secreting the glycerides and high-purity naphthenic acid that was produced in their bodies. Moreover, that glycerin contained potassium chlorate, and the naphthene was full of particularly nasty germs.

When these two secreted liquids were mixed on the skin, the nasty germs inside the naphthene died rapidly when exposed to the oxygen in the atmosphere. As their dead bodies oxidized, they emitted heat, causing the potassium chlorate within the glycerides to catch fire. A highly flammable naphthene-glyceride cocktail surrounded this burning potassium chlorate, resulting in a weapon that could reach up to eighty percent napalm — the same concentration found in a church army's firebomb. An Efreet was a flamethrower with volition.

"That was zero point two five seconds late!" Tres exclaimed. At the same time, with unparalleled aim, he shot down the firebomb that was flying directly at him. Then, Tres charged fiercely. Because the fire was fueled by napalm, the flames wouldn't extinguish right away. The more time Tres took, the greater the disadvantage, as the walls surrounding him went up in flames. A blitzkrieg was the best tactic.

The vampire beyond the flames threw a third bomb at the priest while at the same time jumping toward the ceiling.

In response, Tres' body sank to the floor again. While sliding along the stone floor on his back, he rained a volley of bullets at the shadowed form scudding overhead. The bullets carved holes in the ceiling, one after another, and they seemed to pierce the scampering vampire, as well. Perhaps as part of a final struggle, the conspicuously flexible monster's hand spouted flames. Despite its supernatural vampire strength, though, its speed couldn't match the bullets; if the fireball had been aimed at him, Tres would have been able to counterattack with time to spare.

Between the fire and bullets, however, the small nun was overwhelmed. She pressed herself against the wall, screaming as the vampire's fireball flew at her face.

In response to an earsplitting gunfire from Tres' weapon, the fireball burst apart, breaking into flaming fragments scattered across the floor. Except for an extremely small patch of Esther's skirt, the fire caused no damage to the nun. Even so, she screamed as though her throat would burst: "Look out, Father Tres!"

Dazzling light fell toward the priest. He dodged the fire shooting from his enemy's hands, but Esther clearly saw Tres' handsome face bleached a blue-white as it was enveloped in flames. Intense fire burned the upper half of the mechanical fighter's visage; however, Tres was protected by artificial skin made of anti-ballistic, flame-retardant macromolecular matter, so the only significant damage that occurred was to the area not covered by artificial skin: his optic sensors.

"Father Tres, it's above you!" Esther called out.

The vampire leapt from the ceiling toward the blinded priest. Talons as long as daggers sparkled at the end of his fingertips.

Esther subconsciously moved her body, throwing it sideways to block the prone priest. Although she doubted it would do much good, she hoped that maybe Gunslinger — the veteran of a hundred battles — could escape during the moment it took the Methuselah to tear her to shreds.

Thinking she would be killed, she shouted out a name without being cognizant of it.

She wondered where the final blow would land: her neck, her heart? She hoped the monster would leave her face alone.

While thinking such things with unexpected calm, Esther waited for severe pain to come. The flames dusted her hair with heat — but nothing else happened.

When she timidly opened her eyes, she saw a dark shadow flinching back in the flames — it was the vampire, its talons torn from their roots, its copper-colored eyes burning in agony.

"Won't you please move away from those two friends of mine, Mister Efreet?" With the muzzle of a smoking percussion revolver still aimed at the vampire, the shadow that stood in the doorway pushed up its glasses with one hand. The lamplight made the figure's silver hair shine in the gloom.

"Father Abel!" Esther cried.

"Looks like I arrived just in time! Are you all right, Esther?" The tall priest dropped his gaze, shifting his winter lake-colored eyes toward the girl.

Earnestly doing her best to avoid fainting from relief, Esther reported: "I'm fine! But Father Tres is ... Father Tres shielded me ---- "

"Calm down, he'll be fine," Abel assured her. "You there, don't move." The warning was for the vampire, who'd barely retreated toward the inside wall. "If you move, I'll shoot you. I'm in a bit of a bad mood now."

But the vampire ignored Father Abel's warning completely: Its loose sleeve fluttered sharply before it hurled a fist-sized disk of hidden flame.

"Sheesh!" The priest's percussion revolver bellowed in retaliation, as he'd forewarned. The disk shattered in mid-air. Immediately afterward, however, a thundering boom *dazzled* Abel's eyes.

Everyone's eardrums seemed to split from the noise of the explosion. Abel stayed on his feet against the blast wind, whereas Esther hid her face and covered Tres' body. The vampire simply somersaulted — through the hole his explosion had opened in the wall.

"Damn," Abel cursed.

"Move, Father Nightroad," Tres ordered. He laid on the floor, still blinded, but the android's gun twitched in his hand as though it were alive, its sight aimed at the escaping vampire. Because he'd completely lost his vision, he was targeting his prey by relying on his auditory sensors. The burning room was like a battle zone, though, and in those conditions, he couldn't accurately calculate the position of his opponent from the vibrations in the air.

The microseconds he required to calculate and correct errors caused by heat churn prevented his success. There wasn't enough time: Rounds shot through the vampire's afterimage, grazed its body, and pierced only empty space. This time, the tall monster's slender shadow danced far to the right.

"Ugh! It's no use, he got away!" Abel cried as he ran toward the hole.

Chagrined, Esther lifted up the wounded killing doll. "Are you okay, Father Tres? Father Nightroad, please call somebody to put out the fire! I'll move Father Tres someplace safe!"

"Negative," Tres responded. Shaking off Esther's supporting hands, the blinded soldier stood up. "Sister Esther, extinguish the fire. Father Nightroad, follow the vampire," Tres commanded.

Esther protested: "But Father Tres, your wounds — "

"Not important." He swapped ammunition magazines, seeming very certain of his assessment. Tres shook his head coolly. "I will return to the party hall at once. I don't think a vampire that powerful infiltrated this heavily guarded embassy simply to kill one programmer."

"That means . . . impossible!" Esther cried, guessing Tres' meaning.

"Yes," said Tres. The flames licking the walls cast demonic shadows on the face of the priest, who answered in a monotone: "The target is the VIP visiting this embassy. The Duchess of Milan is in danger."

III

"Assassination?" Caterina queried, gazing at the man on her monitor. Her razor-sharp eyes took on a tough glint, and she looked completely different than she had when seated at the banquet. "There's a possibility that a vampire hiding in Carthage intends to kill me — that's what you're saying, brother?"

"It's not just a 'possibility,' Caterina," Francesco replied.

From the monitor embedded in her bedroom wall, Caterina watched Cardinal Francesco di Medici speak in his typically solemn baritone. Caterina could discover no sign of jest in the fearless features of the man who controlled Vatican territory.

"A group of vampires is targeting a traveling cardinal on foreign soil. We haven't discovered the source of the intelligence yet, but according to our investigation, it's a pretty reliable report. And as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and His Holiness' older half sister, you're the highest-ranking cardinal on foreign soil, Caterina," Francesco explained.

"Indeed." Her throat hurt. She gave a small cough, reaching for the teapot resting on the sideboard. While pouring a glass of green tea with mint, she let her thoughts roam.

It was already common knowledge that the current Pope Alessandro's half brother and half sister were fighting a fierce but covert political battle over the Vatican's most basic politics.

Caterina—who controlled the Vatican's diplomatic policies and moderated those countries who cooperated with the rest of the world—provided a sharp contrast to Francesco—who controlled internal Vatican politics and stubbornly regarded the church's authority as absolute. For example, Francesco and his adherents criticized Caterina's visit to Carthage as a sign of weakness rather than viewing it as good neighboring relations. It wouldn't be at all out of character for Francesco to hinder her mission, such as under the pretext of having intelligence regarding a terrorist plot.

"Because of its proximity to the Empire, terrorist activity thrives in Carthage. There's enough threat to support the fear that monsters who've learned of your plans will take some kind of action," Francesco continued.

Her visi-phone shouldn't have been broadcasting her image to him, so Caterina wondered if Francesco's argument persisted because he'd sniffed out his younger sister's doubt.

The great man continued to lecture her with a fierce countenance: "His Holiness is worried, too. You won't regret following my advice: You should cut the visit short and return home at once."

"For now, I thank you for your report, brother." While pinching mint and pine nuts into her glass of green tea, Caterina chose her next words carefully: "My apologies, but I cannot do as you wish. If I return home now, when the common lords already harbor needless suspicions about us ... you understand how that would look?"

"No doubt, it would cause a stir, as would your being killed by a vampire while there. What about our honor? If such an event were to occur, I have no intention of controlling the faithful who will demand revenge," Francesco argued.

As she rested her chin atop her folded fingers, Caterina considered his meaning. Certainly, there was reason in her brother's words. Her death probably would result in a crusade.

However, to cut her stay in Carthage short was out of the question. So, what to do?

"Hold on just a minute, you two, I have an idea," interjected a third voice, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Hey, honey, I hope you're as well as ever," it added.

Although Caterina tensed for a moment, her expression changed to that of a woman enduring a headache when she saw the familiar face appear in the corner of her monitor.

"Ah, Cardinal Borgia, is that you?" He was an impressive young man, with double eyelids and long hair that cut a rather undignified appearance for a church worker. The Minister of Vatican Public Relations, Cardinal Antonio Borgia, raised one hand in greeting.

"How is Carthage, Caterina? I couldn't sleep all night, worried that you wouldn't be accustomed to the heat. Rome without you is the same as an empty house. One considers that even the Dark Land must be better than here when you are away."

"What do you want, Cardinal Borgia?" Disgusted, Francesco interrupted the young man who was prattling on as if his tongue were oiled. Yet Francesco didn't speak too harshly, because the Borgia family—which had great personal connections both inside and outside the Vatican—was one of high Hispania nobility. A rare tinge of perplexed frustration floated across Francesco's stern face. "Did you call in to lament this assassination plot, or do you have any useful ideas?"

"I wish to fortify your defenses," Antonio offered. A flippant prodigy who controlled the Vatican's publicity and mass media propaganda, Antonio proposed this measure in a lighthearted tone, as if he were deciding on his dinner menu. "Essentially, you're worried

about Caterina's safety, Francesco, so you're telling her to come home because you're uneasy about the embassy's defense, correct?"

"Well, yes," admitted Francesco.

"If she were to hurry home and cut short her diplomatic visit, though, it would offend the Carthage government – right, honey?"

"Yes, it would," Caterina agreed after a pause.

The young man grinned and nodded at the tired siblings before continuing: "If so, our scheme should be obvious! You should send workers from Rome to strengthen the embassy's defenses."

"Wait a minute, Cardinal Borgia." Coughing lightly, Caterina protested, "My Foreign Affairs Department has no workers to spare for defense."

An unexpected suggestion spilled from Borgia's mouth: "What about the Department of Inquisition's workers?" The young man smiled with an expression like that of a child who had thought up a fine prank. "We could send those under Cardinal Medici to assist with defense in Carthage. If we were to do that, you could fortify your defensive posture without using Foreign Affairs Department personnel, right?"

"The Department of Inquisition? You mean to send inquisitors here, to Carthage?" Caterina's voice rose slightly.

Possessing superhuman fighting abilities and armed with the most advanced lost technology, inquisitors were rare individuals who could rival the monstrous strength of vampires. After Armageddon, the Dark Age when the battle with the vampires began, history has it that the Vatican trained church workers who had excellent battle strength and unrelenting faith for anti-vampiric battle. A few hundred years ago, after the vampires generally had been expelled from the human sphere, Inquisitors literally became the fangs of the church: They brandished their swords against enemies, like heretics, terrorists, and those antipathetic to the church. Certainly, anti-vampire and counterterrorist professionals were perfectly suited for this duty.

"Hmm. It isn't a bad idea. Caterina, what's your opinion?" Francesco asked.

"Agreed," came Caterina's reply.

Truth be told, Caterina didn't much like the proposal. It wasn't that she was particularly territorial or minded her brother's help – but the inquisitors had a bad reputation.

They'd been selected as young children and raised by the Vatican explicitly to assume the role of inquisitors, and they swore loyalty only to God and the church – which meant that they instantly regarded anybody who even slightly deviated from church doctrine as evil. Even if their opponent were an innocent little girl, they would exterminate the "evil one" at once, and they took great pride in that. The cities destroyed by inquisitors in this century alone numbered more than twenty.

Could she summon such a dangerous group? If they became violent in Carthage, wouldn't that make the world's suspicions of Vatican plans for invasion a permanent fixture?

Caterina sighed. "After all, brother, it's troublesome for you, and –"

"There is one more merit to sending inquisitors," Francesco interrupted Caterina as she tried to refuse the offer. "Did you know there's a disgraceful rumor being whispered about you lately?"

"Rumor?" asked Caterina, cocking her head in suspicion.

Francesco informed Caterina with unnatural ease: "It's a worthless rumor. Namely, it's 'Minister of Foreign Affairs Caterina Sforza, who is the older sister of His Holiness and a mainstay at the Vatican, is colluding with those detestable monsters from the Empire.' Of course, it's completely groundless."

"What?" This time, Caterina wasn't grateful that her image wasn't being broadcast—she wished they could see her shock. She desperately regulated her breathing, ignoring the green tea spilling from her overturned glass. "I'm secretly siding with the Empire—with the vampires?"

The New Human Empire had occupied the eastern half of the sphere of the globe since the Armageddon. It was the only great anti-human nation of its time.

This nation, led by Augusta, who reigned over all vampires, had abundant land and many powerful lost technologies. Its latent national power was rumored to exceed even that of the Vatican. Its existence was certainly the greatest threat to humanity as it recovered from the Armageddon; therefore, one could call it the greatest threat to the Vatican, which was the leader of all human societies.

Such treachery was unthinkable. However, the expression that blanched Caterina's face wasn't anger. "That truly is a disquieting tale," Caterina grumbled, brushing away the strands of blonde hair that fell across her eyes. By now, she'd already conquered her shock thanks to a tenacious force of will. Secretly, though, her faintly trembling hands were tightly balled up. "Really, where could such baseless rumors spring from?"

"Even for a baseless rumor, it's not too well thought out—a cardinal who's related to His Holiness colluding with vampires? However, because your trip was to Carthage this time, the rumor's been boosted by the idle nonsense that the setting was picked deliberately so you could meet an envoy from the Empire." Whether he knew his younger sister was shaking or not, Francesco kept speaking in an unusually amiable tone. "Well, smoke's coming up in a place where there's no fire. Don't worry. We're searching for the source of those rumors now. As soon as we find it, we'll slam the perpetrators into the dungeons under San Angelo."

"Hey, you two make it pretty hard to get a word in edgewise. Now, can we return to what we were talking about before?" As if to sarcastically suggest that his heart was touched by the sweet affection exchanged between the siblings, Borgia dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief. "If the inquisitors are by Caterina's side during her stay in Carthage, we can dispel such stupid rumors. If she were meeting with an envoy from the Empire, she certainly wouldn't have inquisitors by her side, now would she? So, there you have it, the second benefit: debasing those evil rumors."

"Indeed, I understand," Caterina said. There was no longer a hint of disturbance in her expression, and the beautiful woman related her thanks in a sweet voice, the same as always: "I shall gratefully accept your kindness. Rather than return home, I'll entrust the defenses of this embassy to the inquisitors."

"Leave it to me. I'll arrange it at once. I think I can send them there in three days," Francesco offered. As he struck his chest, his eyes glinted with a look of having successfully deceived Caterina.

Caterina gently smiled as she dreamed about gouging out those eyes.

"Well, the rest is up to you, brother. By the way, hadn't I better say goodbye soon? The hostess shouldn't be away from her banquet seat so long," Caterina said in closing.

"Enjoy yourself fully tonight—but don't let your guard down until the inquisitors arrive," Francesco warned.

"I'll strain my eyes watching for you to return home, Caterina, honey. Ciao," Antonio said, blowing her a kiss.

Even after the men's images had disappeared from the screen, Caterina didn't get to her feet. Instead, lost in thought, she sat perfectly still. The moonlight poured in through the window, making her figure appear like a fine statue.

At length, she suddenly remembered something and flicked her earring. "What did you think of that conversation, Sister Kate?"

"First of all, shouldn't we find the source of the rumor?" Kate questioned.

There was nobody in the room but Caterina; the quiet woman's voice came from the cardinal's earring.

"It might be a person within the Foreign Affairs Department. Of course, it might be Cardinal Medici asking leading questions on a hunch, without knowing anything," she continued.

"Well, that's possible. He's overly suspicious concerning this visit, but ... If I had a pipeline to the Empire that easily, there'd be no trouble!" Caterina declared. She crossed her long legs, clucking her tongue sharply. "Caterina Sforza is colluding with the Empire, they say." This malicious rumor, in one sense, was completely true: Caterina had been secretly trying to secure a diplomatic channel with the Empire for years. A thousand years had passed since the abominable Armageddon, after all. So, her intention was to construct a pipeline of negotiations through the headquarters of those who had fought humans since before the Dark Age. Although she wanted to speak with the vampires, if she took one wrong step, it would result in her swift ruination. No, it wouldn't merely invite the destruction of Caterina herself—if she bungled it, the huge scandal it would create could shake the foundations of the Vatican itself.

Yet, that was the very reason Caterina braved the risk.

Although she'd avoided catastrophic failure, she'd yet to form any allies. No matter how many times she negotiated at a local level, dealing with problems like criminals crossing their borders or the protection of refugees, she hadn't yet achieved contact with the center of the Empire—in particular, the supreme leader of the vampires, Augusta. It even remained unclear whether Caterina's intention to make contact had been communicated that high up.

Did they know Caterina's intent? Were they aware, but ignoring it? Or...

"As for me, I'm just worried about the news that some group is aiming for your life, Caterina." The report from her earring returned the pensive beauty's thoughts to the plane of reality. "As Cardinal Medici said, in a remote place like this, we can't rely upon the police or military. Please be careful."

"Well, the inquisitors will be here in a few days and can concern themselves with that problem—although I'm rather worried that they might actually go too far to protect me." Laughing listlessly, Caterina stood up. The banquet was still in full swing—she could hear the sounds drifting on the night breeze from outside the window. As she combed through her curly blonde hair, the beauty softly closed her eyes. "If anything were to happen to me because of them, I could always lodge a protest with my brother. . . . But never mind that, is Father Abel still in the party hall? I need to speak with him."

"Let's see—just a moment, please. I'll take a look at the surveillance cameras in the party hall. . . . No, I don't see him among the guests. Sister Esther isn't there, either. Haven't those two gotten anywhere on their assignment?" Kate asked.

"Sister Esther?" Caterina asked in a hard voice.

"Yes, Sister Esther Blanchett—you know, the nun who joined half a year ago." Sister Kate gave an extremely business-like answer to her superior. "She's a very capable person. I inspected her evaluation results at the training grounds, and she was at the top in most of her courses: liberal culture, self-defense, intelligence analysis, languages . . . Besides, just from serving as the leader of the Partisans for a year, the group leadership skills she developed are astonishing," said Kate.

"I know—I met her. Father Abel seems to be keeping a good eye on her. The transfer to Rome was also his recommendation, and he himself suggested her for support personnel duty," Caterina explained.

"He probably sympathizes. Somehow, that girl is very pitiful. "That was Kate's way of saying that she herself was very sympathetic to Esther." According to the records left in Istavan, her mother is unknown. A man called Edward Blanchett called himself her father. His name implies he probably was the rank of an Albion knight—but as a baby, she was left in Saint Marchar's Church. And moreover, after he left his daughter in the care of the church, Edward Blanchett failed to communicate with them. By the age of seventeen, Esther was an orphan. I understand why Abel is sympathetic."

"When my family was killed, I was fourteen." Caterina's voice was as mild as ever when she interrupted her subordinate's report, but there was a defensive hardness underlying her calm. While her fingers played with her curly blonde hair, the cardinal gently chipped away at Kate's sympathy: "A person's history has nothing to do with his or her abilities or value. I, too, recognize that she is superior. However, in the end, she's still a child. Excessive expectations are forbidden, Sister Kate."

"Yes, I'm very sorry," Kate apologized. Her superior's somewhat cold assessment of Esther was probably unexpected. After all, Esther was a novice who had exceptional talent and potential. It was in Caterina's character to like talented people, so Kate had thought she'd surely like the young woman.

"Hey, what's that?" asked Caterina.

Kate cocked her head at her superior's rare reaction. "*What's wrong, Caterina?*" she asked.

"It looks like smoke's rising over there. It can't be a fire?" Now that she mentioned it, she could hear urgent shouts mingling with the noise from the party hall in the garden and corridors.

There was a knock on her bedroom door, and multiple female voices could be heard beyond it — the nuns working for the cardinal. "Um, very sorry to bother you, Your Eminence," called out one nun. "At any rate, a fire has broken out inside the building. So, just to be safe, the ambassador is asking you to be prepared to move."

"Understood. I'll unlock my door now. Please wait. Oh, what a busy night," Caterina said as she reached for the doorknob to let the nuns in.

"Don't move." A small hand grasped her arm. "Don't make any noise. If you do, I'll kill you," whispered the stranger.

Caterina's arm suddenly became paralyzed.

The fingers that grasped her arm were slender — as if made of wires. Moreover, they didn't seem very strong. Despite that, Caterina bit her lip as she endured severe pain. She felt as if her bones would break. It was quite inhuman strength. "You're . . . ?" Breaking into a cold sweat, Caterina turned her head to look at the vampire.

Beside her stood a shadow, shrouded in tribal clothing that was draped in the Bedouin manner. The face beneath the turban was shaded from the moonlight, so she couldn't make it out, but the vampire was extremely short in stature, the same size as a three-or four-year-old human child.

"Wh-who are you?" Caterina asked.

"I said 'don't move,' Terran. Or don't you believe my threat?"

The second moon's distorted face peeked out between the clouds, throwing light into the room—and revealing a flawless white face, with sparkling white fangs protruding from between thin lips. "Vampire," she breathed

"'Vampire,' is it?"

As it seethed, violent anger registered momentarily across its sexless face. The cardinal couldn't tell if it was a fair girl or a beautiful boy. Its eyes, tinted like flecks of gold scattered on polished copper, narrowed hatefully.

"Rude Terran! You, with the social standing of a detestable monkey, call me a monster, when I've come to tell you the Imperial will!" The vampire's angry voice certainly merited fear as it rasped haltingly, but Caterina didn't freeze because of fear.

"Imperial will?" Caterina directed her ash-colored eyes at the youth's beautiful face, which was still distorted with displeasure. Her fear of death evaporated. If the person before her 'eyes had been the assassin, she'd be dead by now. And furthermore . . .

"Did you say 'Imperial will'? It can't be ... are you from the Emp –?"

The wall before her eyes burst into flames.

Thirteen-millimeter silver bullets shot in from beyond the wall, grazing past her nose and piercing the shoulder of the vampire who'd caught her arm.

It screamed, unhanding Caterina as if its arms had snapped off. The shadow retreated, staggering.

"Terran . . . *Asutz nebuni! A se fakei de raw/*" the vampire hissed.

"Wait! Please wait! You –"

The vampire sped to the moonlit window as if by teleport. Its eyes, burning with hatred, turned to face Caterina. She now could tell it was a boy.

"After everything, Terran ... I should have never trusted the Vatican!"

The door at the entrance of the room was kicked open with a loud boom, and a pitiful priest in a burned cassock appeared. "Rewriting permanent tactical memory from search and destroy to genocide mode. Delete start," Tres stated.

An empty cartridge fell from Tres' M13. As a fresh magazine fell from Tres' sleeve and slid into the grip, the boy placed his foot on the windowsill and shouted: "Your choice has been made! If it's going to be this way, either resign yourselves to being stupid, unchanging monkeys – or die! That's all there is!"

"Wait! Father Tres, please stop shooting!" Caterina's order was a moment too late. The instant the silver bullets were fired, the boy jumped – he knew they would mean his death. His white shadow melted into the night.

"Target lost. Stop order received. Damage report, Duchess of Milan," said Tres. He took his finger off the trigger.

Her guard dog's voice didn't register in Caterina's thoughts at the moment. Walking to the windowsill, still dazed, she gazed down into the darkness that had swallowed the beautiful apparition.

In reaction to both the fire and the unexpected gunfire, an uproar began. The embassy resembled a poked hornet's nest, with distinguished ladies screaming in the corridor and men and women creeping out of the garden, their quiet love affairs interrupted. And there, giving orders to workers and trying to extinguish the fire, was Esther, the novice.

But Caterina simply stared at the darkness.

"I've come to tell you the Imperial will . . . Either resign yourselves to being stupid, unchanging monkeys – or die! That's all there is!"

"If that . . . no, he..." Caterina trembled.

The city of Carthage sank into silence.

Idle spectators flocked to the fire at the Vatican embassy. So, when a handsome shadow appeared in an alley behind the marketplace, the only one there to spot it was a feral cat, hurriedly eating a late dinner out of the trashcans.

"Shit, those damned barbarian Terran!" the vampire seethed. Beneath his messy blond hair, his crimson lips dripped wrath like poison. And from between the slender fingers that clutched his shoulder, bright red liquid flowed, visible in the night.

"Damned detestable Terran! If not for Her Majesty's strict orders, I'd have killed them all. Shit!"

A quiet tenor voice spoke: "Ion."

The blond youth turned around, startled, but his expression softened when he recognized the person there. "Radu, is it you? Don't scare me. I thought you were a guard pursuing me."

"Sorry. I was worried because you returned so late." The young man who spoke had hair so blue it looked almost black. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties and, like Ion, he was dressed as a Bedouin—although it would be clear to anybody's eyes that his white face wasn't that of a nomad. His handsome looks bore a strong enough resemblance to the boy that he could've been an older brother—but the similarity resulted from complex marital relationships between their two families that had carried on for generations.

"So, what was the result? Did you meet with those Terran safely? Ion, you're hurt!"

"Ow!" The boy grimaced slightly at the hand Radu placed on his shoulder. "Radu, quiet, please! I was shot by a silver bullet—a stupid Terran shot me, without listening to what I had to say!"

"Silver?" Radu's face clouded. He swiftly drew the short sword at his hip and ripped open the blond boy's clothing. His slender eyebrows furrowed at the red-black gunshot wound marring Ion's smooth shoulder. "Horrible . . . Can you bear it for a little while, *tovarich*?"

"Yeah, do it." The blond boy nodded and closed his eyes.

The blue-haired young man poised his short sword over the wound. "Here we go," he said, and with a gesture that looked almost casual, the blade slipped into the white shoulder.

The bullet had bored through to the bone. Luckily, it took less than a second for the deft blade to gouge it out. As bright blood drew beautiful patterns across the boy's white skin, the deformed lump of silver fell to the pavement.

"We'll return to the mansion for now, Ion," the young man said quietly before he began sucking the poisoned blood from the boy's wound. Thanks to his severe pain, Ion couldn't respond, so Radu continued: "First, I'll treat this wound properly. After that, we'll take our time to consider whether to try talking to them once more—or kill them all."

Heretic's Flames

*And they went out, they and all their hosts with them,
much people, even as the sand that is upon sea shore in multitude,
with horses and chariots very many.
—Joshua 11:4*

I

Carthage was a free city, and one of the largest in Africa, its population exceeding two hundred thousand. Enclosed by the vast desert to the south and west and by the sea to the north and east, and blessed with a good natural harbor and abundant oil resources, the city had been an indispensable strategic point in Mediterranean trade since ancient times. Because of its importance, its reconstruction had been among the first of the Dark Age.

At that time, Saint Elissa had been the Queen of Carthage, having accrued fervent devotion as the city's patron saint. She was beloved for providing the city with a good government, and she also was regarded as a saint who had received God's special favor. There were many legends surrounding her: the miracle that made a spring flow from the parched earth thanks to her prayer, the story of a desert storm that suddenly saved her army when it was surrounded by the enemy in the desert, and so forth. When vampires pressed into the region, she reached martyrdom by defending the city. The people who mourned her were said to have sealed her corpse deep under the city of Carthage.

Among the false creeds collected by the Vatican official assembly, one declared Elissa was an angel sent by God, who had only pretended to die and even now was protecting the city of Carthage. Another declared that the sandstorms in the desert were a result of her wings flapping from above as she watched over Carthage. As was recorded in the false creed called "The Gospel of Ambrosius," she was known to her followers as "Iblis," meaning "The Angel of the Burning Sand."

After the Armageddon, the world metamorphosed considerably, with one common principle remaining stubbornly steadfast: Fools and the rich like high places.

In the northern suburbs of the city, atop the hills where the sea was visible, settled the upper class residents of Carthage, complete with their lines of homes with pure white walls and clear blue windows, groups of elegant mansions in orange groves, and white yachts lazily floating atop the deep blue sea situated directly below.

In addition to the wealthy residents, the city of Carthage was populated with the rich people of Rome and Napoli, who vacationed there. Were the young man and woman huddling on this cafe terrace with a fine view perhaps newlyweds on their honeymoon?

"There's no mistake. The building is the two-story one you can see there," the young woman seated in a corner of the cafe whispered. Whether from heat or stress, her cheeks were slightly dewy with perspiration, the same as the glass of lemonade placed before her. Next to the glass were the personal effects of the programmer who'd died two days ago. From a thickly swollen wallet, the woman drew a check, its face value five hundred thousand dinars. Such a sum could build a fine mansion—but the woman's gaze was aimed at the signature, not the amount.

"This check was issued only three days ago, made out to Pietro Borromini. The issuer is a trading company called Baul Maritime. Its address, if the authorities' records are correct, is in that residence," Esther stated.

"But Baul Maritime hasn't conducted any business activity whatsoever since it was established eight years ago. It's a perfectly bogus company. Even the so-called original founders consisted only of a list of fictitious names," Abel replied.

The silver-haired priest's calm response contrasted sharply with the nun's. As he scarfed down a thin donut soaked in tea, he directed his binoculars toward the residential area. Was that mansion, built as if it thrust out of a cliff, a wealthy person's residence or business headquarters for a slow-moving company? It was a luxurious two-story mansion—not unusual for this area. Remarkably strange, however, was that despite the noon hour, all the curtains were drawn.

"Hmm. Baul Maritime or whatever is probably a dummy company for the Empire. My understanding is that they haven't added one new employee in eight years," Abel explained.

"But it's in a highly populated area?" Esther cocked her head as she continued investigating Borromini's belongings. Would it be possible for vampires to set up a hideout in a high-class residential area?

"It's a common story around here," replied an unsurprised Abel. He put his tea to his lips, spilling donut crumbs onto his cassock. "The Empire has opened ten or twenty dummy companies here in Carthage, so it isn't particularly strange if one of that number is located in a high-class residential area."

Imperial and Vatican companies were completely cut off from one another, politically speaking, but exceptions were made, as was typical in the sphere of economics. For example, the Empire exported machine parts and medicines that human companies had difficulty manufacturing; on the other hand, human companies exported rare and precious metals, although in very small quantities. Of course, it wasn't possible for those deals to be conducted in the open; instead, they customarily took the form of a triangular trade on a secret market, made possible by dummy corporations. Carthage was the main stage for hidden transactions of that nature.

"Well, even companies who have a history of quarreling will make exceptions when there's cash flow in the equation. That's the reason the world powers can't touch this city. . . Ah, hold on, Esther—won't you show me that, the map? Yes, that one."

Abel was gazing at a document that Esther had spread out. It seemed like some kind of map, but it was creased, faded, and worn, probably the result of a fair amount of use.

"What is it?" Esther asked.

"An aqueduct map—no, an *underground* aqueduct map," Abel replied.

Densely drawn fine contour lines had been added, and narrow paths seemed to thread between those lines, creating some sort of network. At first glance, it looked just like a topographic map, but when Abel reviewed it carefully, he saw that all the numbers on the contour lines were negative.

"It's an extremely detailed map. I wonder who in the world made it? I've never seen such an accurate underground aqueduct map. . . . It's strange, isn't it?" Abel asked, suddenly narrowing his eyes. "This aqueduct also has 'the Queen's Grave' listed, but that should've been completely sealed up by now."

"The Queen's Grave? Is that Saint Elissa's grave?" Esther inquired.

"Yes. It's six hundred sixty feet beneath the cathedral," the priest answered, his mind somewhere else. "Before the Armageddon, it was used as a shelter—but after the death of Lieutenant Shrite, it was sealed. There should've been no way to access it since then."

"Lieutenant Shrite?" Esther tilted her head at the unknown name. "Was he an acquaintance of yours, Father?"

"Hmm?" The priest, who had been examining the map as if obsessed, lifted his head abruptly at the casual question. His blue eyes looked restless. "Lieutenant Shrite, who said such a thing?"

Esther frowned at the priest's flustered response. The heat was exhausting, and they'd already been through a lot today, but she couldn't forgive him for being so absentminded prior to a battle with vampires. "Didn't you just say the name Lieutenant Shrite? Was he a soldier somewhere?"

"Maybe you heard wrong," Abel retorted. He roughly folded up the map and shrugged, blushing. As he was taking out his pocket watch, he shook his head with unusual firmness. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"What? But just now, I was certain —

"Esther, you misheard. . . . Oh, whoops! Is it so late already?" The priest pushed up his glasses, downing the dregs of his teacup before standing up. "I guess I got a little too

relaxed! Well, we've finished our meal, so let's get to work. Tomorrow, the Department of Inquisition group will arrive, which means we need to solve this today, or Caterina will give us a good scolding. Ah, busy busy. It's hard being an underling."

Esther paused, wondering if what she'd said had upset him.

As Abel brushed off his cape and hastily turned to leave, Esther called out to him: "Oh, Father, please wait just a moment! I'll come, too!" Shaking off her doubts, Esther also stood, following after the priest as soon as she'd drained her glass of its lemonade. She touched her fingers to the possessions that hung in the folds of her skirt, making certain they were secure. Today's opponent was a vampire, a strong enemy — but if she and this priest joined forces, they could beat the monster. She'd proven as much when she'd fought as a Partisan in her hometown. Certainly, as long as they were together —

But Abel shook his head. "Oh, Esther, you don't need to come. Please, wait here."

"Huh?" Esther's face relaxed for an instant at the unexpected words. "I'm going, too! I won't let you go into that Efreet's nest alone, Father!"

"Well, I'm floored," Abel replied, scratching his head at the sight of the indignant girl, completely baffled. "Actually, Caterina's orders were for me to handle this alone, Esther. You won't mind waiting here obediently, will you?"

"Wh-why? If you're going to arrest those vampires, it's better to have at least one assistant with —"

"Arrest? I'm not going to arrest them."

"Huh?" Esther frowned.

The vampire who'd attacked the embassy the other night could be hiding in that mansion, along with many other vampires. Those fiends had murdered Borromini — who'd probably had some connection with them — and attacked Cardinal Sforza, of all people. When Cardinal Sforza had ordered Abel to track them down, Esther thought they would be arresting them, but... ?

"Not arrest them . . . then, what will you do?" Esther asked.

There was a long silence. Abel scratched his head as if stumped. Then, he coughed once. "I can't reveal the subject of my mission to anyone except another agent."

"So, in short, you're saying I have no right to know," Esther concluded.

A troubled light shone in the priest's eyes. He was at a loss. Finally, he muttered quietly, "Well, if you want me to put it bluntly ... yes, it's that kind of thing."

Esther's face changed color at those words.

Peering at her worriedly, Abel added consolingly, "At any rate, I'll have you stand by here. Those are Caterina's — I mean Cardinal Sforza's orders. All right?"

"After all ..." Using all her willpower, she suppressed a pout. After a pause, she said, "After all we've been through, you won't tell me *anything*, Father?"

"Um, Esther, I can't —

"Fine." Raising a finger in front of the priest's mouth to silence him, Esther smiled. It was the kind of listless smile a woman wore when she wanted to break into tears when crying was inappropriate. "It's fine. Please, go — I'll wait here."

Abel looked as if he still wanted to say something, but he probably couldn't think of the right words. An awkward silence hung between them for about ten seconds. "I'm sorry, Esther. Well, I have to be going." He trudged off, leaving Esther behind at the shop.

She stared at his back, watching him walk away with shoulders hunched as if it were chilly, despite the warm sunshine.

In the end, I'm a child, a stranger — I'm baggage.

His tall shadow turned as he took a side road. Esther's hand unconsciously toyed with the hard object fastened to her right thigh.

Certainly, I might be a child or a stranger! Maybe it's natural that Abel won't tell me anything about himself.

"That's it!" She pounded the innocent table and stood up. Setting down the paid bill, she left the cafe with long strides. Her pocket jingled, but not with the music of silver coins — no, although the objects were unmistakably silver, they were something very different than currency.

Certainly, I'm a child, a stranger. I'll acknowledge that. But I'm not baggage!

II

"Hmm, well, it isn't infected," Radu offered. The young man, his blue hair gathered at his nape, spilled one drop from a syringe into a flask. He lightly shook the flask, and the sky blue reagent changed to a thick black color, like tar. "The reactivation of the blood-borne bacillus has started, although it's building slowly. You'll recover soon with a little rest, Ion."

"It's humiliating for this body to have been wounded like a Terran's," Ion declared, pushing himself up in bed as he ground his teeth. Aside from the bandage on the pallid boy's shoulder, nothing covered the upper half of his body, which was so white it looked as if it had never once been exposed to the sun. "Moreover, to be unable to move because of this small wound — shit! It's pathetic! Am I not as indolent as a Terran, laid up like this?"

"It can't be helped. To us, to our bacillus, silver is a greater enemy than UV light — so now that your bacillus has entered a dormant state, you're not so different from Terran, physiologically speaking. If we aren't careful, that wound could kill you," Radu explained, consoling his partner, whose lovely face was flushed with anger. Although the blue-haired youth wore a wry smile when he spoke, he wasn't bluffing.

The Kudrak Bacillus that was contained within all Methuselah blood was quite unique. Silver atoms were able to temporarily cease all activity of these extremely small parasites, the source of the vampires' superhuman strength. From the point of view of the host Methuselah, silver was tantamount to poison. If Radu hadn't cut out that bullet on the spot the night before last, sucking out Ion's silver-tainted blood, Ion might have died.

"Well, resign yourself to staying here and devote yourself to recuperating. When the bacillus returns to normal, that wound will close up quickly. You're lucky — it almost hit your heart. Was that mechanical doll all that tough?" asked Radu.

"No! He came shooting out of nowhere!" The boy shouted, his pale face angry. He let out a cry of pain and clutched his shoulder. One of the highest nobles in the Empire, his pride was so great as to make him resent such displays of weakness. When he peered up at the young man's face with accusing eyes, his lips twisted in dissatisfaction. "How could I suffer a defeat by the likes of a Terran?"

"Did you do something to instigate the Terran? For example, did you try to harm that target — Sforza, you said?" Radu asked.

"I swear I didn't! I merely spoke to her! They must not have liked something about that, so the android came in suddenly, shooting. Really, they're incorrigible monkeys!"

"Well, the outer Terran do love war." Radu shook his head, throwing Ion's bloodstained bandage in the trash.

Through the second floor's anti-UV glass, Terran could be seen flocking in the main street. A faint tinge of disgust appeared in Ion's white face as he and Radu looked down on them.

"Well, Ion, what'll we do now?" Radu went to the window. He chewed some of the tobacco that the outer Terran liked. Of course, the nicotine toxin didn't affect Methuselah at all, but Radu liked the flavor, so he'd continued chewing the stuff ever since they'd

ventured out of the Empire. "After all, the visit has failed. As soon as your wound's healed, shall we return home?"

"No, we can't do that," Ion shook his head, his angelic face smirking. He groaned with wicked obstinacy. "To we Boyar aristocrats, Her Majesty's orders are absolute. So, let's try approaching them once again."

"But don't you hate the Terran? If so —

"I still hate them — merely thinking about them disgusts me," Ion spit, screwing up his face as if he'd tasted rotten blood. Yet the boy stubbornly refused to waver: "Nonetheless, an Imperial command is absolute and sacred. I can't ignore it."

"Indeed. What is Her Majesty thinking? The Terran have been our enemies for hundreds of years, calling us 'vampires.' It's already too late."

"Don't say it, Radu." Ion clearly wasn't satisfied with the Imperial order he'd received, but he spoke as if he was trying to convince himself of its validity: "No matter what you think of it, we were selected for this task. I must faithfully execute the Imperial order, but Radu, what will *you* do? You are free to return home if you like."

"I really want to, but..." The young man's handsome red lips stretched in a smile. "Unfortunately, you're the senior envoy, and I'm your assistant. I'll complete the mission with you."

"Sorry," Ion offered.

"It's all right. But how is your throat? You haven't drunk anything but water for almost forty hours. Isn't it a little dry?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it." Lightly stroking his throat, Ion told a harmless lie. In truth, he still wasn't thirsty to speak of. The cause of a Methuselah's characteristic blood-sucking behavior lay in the anemia the blood-borne bacillus caused by destroying its host's red blood cells. Because that bacillus was now dormant, Ion's thirst for blood had ebbed. However, he felt grateful for his friends concern. "Can I have a little 'Aqua Vitae'?"

"All right. Wait just a minute and I'll make some downstairs," Radu said as he began walking away from the window with light steps. "I'd better put plenty of blood-building medicine in it. Will iron do?"

"Yes, but a little less opium, please. Instead —

"A spoonful of sugar," I suppose? I know your tastes."

"Even so, you always put in too much opium when you make it." Ion pouted at his friend, who acted more like an older brother than an assistant.

His pout was mirrored by Radu. "Your tastes are too horrible, tovarich," he said as he closed the door behind him.

While lying on his back listening to his companion's footsteps down the hallway grow fainter, Ion stared absently through the anti-UV glass. In their monotonous world, a great many Terran were passing through the streets. Young people walked side by side, laughing noisily. Old men in felt hats puffed on their water pipes. Children ran around like energetic puppies, falling down and crying before their mothers lifted them up. ...

Under the influence of bacillus inactivation, Ion's senses were as dull as a Terran's. Perhaps because of that, he was in a somewhat strange mood. He felt dim, as if the edges of his five senses — normally razor sharp — were blotted, and his focus was slightly off". While that felt unbearably uneasy, it was also strangely comfortable.

If I were attacked by something now, it would be the end of me.

Ion was perhaps the strongest creature on this planet. He was a Methuselah. With one wave of his arm, he could tear a tiger to shreds. It was even possible for him to cleanly tear out a completely armed Terran's spine before the creature took notice. So feeling weak was very new to him, and it was a ridiculously unpleasant experience. He was unable to heal a

small gunshot wound, and his five dull senses were unable to sense Radu on the first floor....

Hearing the sound of the knob turning behind him, Ion smiled bitterly. He hadn't even noticed his friend's footsteps in the hall.

"That was fast, Radu. Did you put the sugar in like I asked? Your taste is —

It wasn't his friend standing in the doorway. A stranger held up a shotgun, aiming right between Ion's eyes.

III

"Wh-wh-what in the world does this mean, Your Eminence?" Shaifu Al-Saalibii, the Bey of Carthage, shouted, spitting saliva. "What in the world is Rome thinking?"

"Please calm down, Your Excellency," Caterina soothed.

The governor's bald head shook slightly, the whiskers around his mouth quivering violently.

"First, let's get confirmation. In the meantime, we need to stay calm," Caterina repeated.

"Calm down? Calm down? Ridiculous! How can I possibly stay calm? Does the Vatican plan on a military occupation of Carthage?" he asked.

When speaking to a cardinal, those were reckless words. If this were an age when religious trials flourished, Saalibii could've been sentenced to burn for those questions. However, nobody here would blame him for what he'd said. The monitors that were embedded in the walls of the Governor's office were displaying a vivid black-and-white scene that understandably made the man's blood pressure rise.

"*This is Carthage Central Airport Control!*" The speakers flanking the monitor had been spitting out a number of static-ridden voices for quite a while. Tremors of bewilderment and anger seeped into those voices. "*You have arrived in the midst of an aerial invasion! Your approach is illegal, and you're on a collision course. I cannot allow you to land! Cease attempted landing at once. I repeat: Cease attempted landing at once!*"

On the monitor, a passenger biplane that had been approaching the landing strip twisted its huge body in panic. As soon as its flaps were lowered, it waddled out of the way like a chicken menaced by an attacking bird of prey. Such an unreasonable maneuver might easily result in three or four wounded passengers—however, everyone's attention was focused elsewhere, riveted on the huge shadows that were suddenly landing as if they wished to mow down Carthage's planes.

The monitor revealed that the shadows were three huge airplanes. Armored fuselages hung under the angular air bladders, each of which easily exceeded six hundred feet. Even without seeing the cannons that neatly lined the gunwales, it was clear these weren't civilian passenger planes. And the ash-colored fuselages were embossed with a crest that combined lightning and a hammer. . . .

"*Vineam Domini*—the Department of Inquisition! This is crazy! They shouldn't have come until tomorrow!" Caterina trembled.

The three aerial battleships landed by force, just as if the airport were in the middle of a battle zone. Red lights blinked, indicating the gun ports were without muzzle covers, the bomb storehouses unlocked.

"/ repeat: *Informing the arriving aerial group . . .*" —the controller's voice was shrill with fear, but he was praiseworthy in the way he remained faithful to his duty — "*Informing the arriving aerial group on collision course: Your course is illegal! Requesting you cease approach at once! Requesting you cease approach at once!*"

Everyone was hoping that the invaders' communications equipment had failed, and that was the reason they'd preserved such an uncanny silence . . . but that was not the case.

"*This is the Vatican Department of Inquisition's Aerial Battleship Raguel,*" came a man's voice, astringent like rust. "*I repeat: This is the Department of Inquisition's Aerial Battleship Raguel. Can you read me, Control?*"

"*Yes, I can read you. Thank you for your reply, Raguel.*" The controller's voice seemed to convey the hope that the Raguel's radio was in poor shape, which would explain why the planes had disobeyed Air Traffic Control. "*Do you understand my instructions? We cannot allow your ships' continued course. Your arrival has scrambled air traffic. Remain airborne while awaiting further instructions.*"

"*Request refused.*"

The clipped answer destroyed the controller's hopes.

"*We have orders to investigate the attack on Cardinal Sforza that occurred within your city. Based on the Fourth Article of the Canon, no municipality may place any restrictions whatsoever on our actions until we've confirmed that the vampire terrorists have been destroyed. Accordingly, we refuse your orders. Control, move those other airplanes out of the way, or we'll bring them down! Over and out.*"

"Wait!" Caterina called out, her razor-colored eyes flashing. Her slender hand pulled at the microphone. "Raguel, this is Minister of Foreign Affairs Caterina Sforza. Heed my warning for the commanding officer: Depart at once!" Caterina's voice was deadly serious. If her hands could've reached the superior officer aboard the Raguel just then, she probably would have gouged out his heart.

The fools her brother had sent did not consider how hard she'd have to work to recover the common lords' trust toward the Vatican now. "Hurry! If you don't depart immediately, you'll spend the rest of your lives in the dungeon at San Angelo," Caterina threatened.

The speakers were silent for a moment. When the commanding pilot spoke again, his tone had changed to one of respect, as if he were a different person: "*Pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Eminence. I am Brother Petro, appointed Director of the Inquisition Department. I am the commanding officer, sent by Cardinal Medici to investigate the attack on Your Eminence.*"

"Brother Petro ... II Ruinante?" The blood drained from Caterina's face as she gripped the mic.

Brother Petro was the Director of the Inquisition—the strongest and vilest knight in the Vatican. He was an ally-killing soldier who, four years ago in the Battle of Bohemia, single-handedly had destroyed one company of the Hussite heretical army that had caused a rebellion, as well as two independent army companies. Her head hurt to think why this man, of all people, had been sent to Carthage.

"Brother Petro, whose permission did you receive to carry out military activity on foreign territory? I never approved of such a thing."

"*Oh, dear,*" Petro responded, with no sign of intimidation nor discomfiture in the man's voice in response to the cardinal's anger. Dreadfully, the Chief Inquisitor replied with the uncommon civility that he was rumored to have: "*I'm afraid I was told it was Your Eminence who requested the support of the Inquisition Department, that you said, 'I'll entrust all defenses to the Department of Inquisition during my stay in Carthage.'*"

"Ugh!" Caterina was at a loss for words. Of course, she'd only accepted Francesco's proposal the night before last because she'd been thinking about preventing a terrorist attack. However, if she were to acknowledge the intervention of the Department of Inquisition as legitimate, it would be impossible to restrain them from performing criminal arrests—and their way of doing things was oppressive and violent.

How unlucky. How impossible! I was attacked by a vampire within five minutes of receiving my brother's warning, and on top of that, the Department of Inquisition has appeared in less than two days when he had estimated it would take them three!

The poor timing of the vampire's attack, right after she'd received her brother's warning, and her brother's swiftness in dispatching the Department of Inquisition overseas couldn't be merely coincidental.

Caterina's thoughts raced as the three aerial battleships—the Raguel, the Rufael, and the Akrasiel—landed, one after the other. Many questions plagued her, but before she could deal with them, she had to stop this deluge of steel. "At any rate, I'll contact my brother at once. Brother Petro, tell your corps as much, and halt all activity. Do not move from the airport," Caterina commanded, her words like ice.

"I'm very sorry, but I must refuse your orders," Petro answered. Talking to him was like talking to an iron wall. Rather unscrupulously, Petro continued, *"Although I am unworthy, I have been entrusted by the Minister of the Inquisition with full authority in this holy task. Without an order from Cardinal Medici, I cannot rest even temporarily."*

"Mad dogs!" Caterina mumbled under her breath.

The Chief Inquisitor continued talking rather quietly to Caterina, *"But please don't worry, Your Eminence. We have our eye on the vampires' safe house. If I leave here and personally set out to destroy them, we won't be in your way for too long."*

"You have your eye on it already?" asked Caterina. *What does he mean? Those of us already here took all night simply to research the address!*

The three aerial battleships had landed, and their rear hatches now were opening wide. Soldiers in black field uniforms appeared, armed with carbines and machine pistols. Each wore a shining silver Vineam Domini badge on his beret. These were the infamous antiterrorism corps under the Department of Inquisition—the Carabinieri.

Behind them, a conspicuously large shadow, more than thirty feet in total length, was turning around. It was a Goliath I: the latest model computer-controlled battle tank. The Vatican had placed ten of them into commission last year. With plenty of salvaged lost technology, this unmanned battle tank had enough firepower to do battle equal to that of the entire Carthage army. It was equipped with fifty-millimeter short cannons for its main guns, with thirty-millimeter machine guns attached to two revolving towers. Unmistakably, they were over-equipped for taking on just one or two vampires.

"Do you mean to start a war here? I'm contacting Cardinal Medici right now! I won't let the Department of Inquisition do whatever it pleases, Brother Petro!" Caterina shouted.

"As Your Eminence wishes. However,"—II Ruinante's answer was so quiet and composed that it would calm even a crying child—*"Cardinal Medici left Rome last night on an official inspection tour. By the time you reach him, I shall probably be finished with my holy task."*

IV

When Esther first tried pointing the gun, she forgot to so much as put her finger on the trigger—but considering the situation, who would've blamed her for forgetting everything that had been drilled into her for the past five months? The fact that she was simply standing there with her mouth hanging open was more than understandable.

After she'd watched Abel walk away, she'd set off on her own. She'd snuck into this house and crept along a hallway. Then, when she'd tried opening a door, she found a half-naked young man sitting on a bed. His beautiful face was as white as fresh snow, and he looked

like some kind of fairy or demigod, even. His pained expression and the wisps of hair that hung down over his cheeks only increased his charm.

It was natural that Esther froze, completely forgetting about the events of the night before last. After all, she'd spent years being raised by the church, and so she had no experience with members of the opposite sex — let alone ones so handsome as this!

"Ah, um ..." she babbled. Should she apologize and shut the door? Or should she apologize after shutting the door and coming in? Esther opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water.

"Terran!" A scream came from the bed. The boy's voice hadn't yet changed completely.

Esther's head cleared when she heard the hatred swelling in the young man's voice.

The white blanket already was dancing up to the ceiling. At the same time, the boy's lean figure jumped out of his sickbed.

If Esther had been a veteran and kept her cool for a few minutes, she would have noticed that he moved slowly for a vampire. However, he was just slow "for a vampire," so to the human eye, he still moved with excessive speed.

Esther put her finger on the trigger, shouting, "V-vampi — yah!"

The charging vampire struck, knocking her down. The demon of a boy bared his fangs and hovered above the girl, who'd fallen on her rear and bounced like a ball.

"How did you get in, you worm?" His lips, red as if painted, spat out blood-colored words. His copper eyes glared daggers at the nun. "Answer me! How did you — "He grabbed the front of her habit and violently pushed her to the floor.

Esther gasped, remembering the disgusting odor of charred flesh and the image of the gold chain wrapped around Borromini's burnt arm. / *don't want to be killed, and I really don't want my blood to be sucked or my body to be burned!*

In that instant, her fear and hatred turned into explosive anger. The battle program that had been beaten into her for five months kicked in and she lashed out, responding to pure survival instinct. She twisted her neck almost spastically, biting down on the boy's fingers without hesitation

"Ow!" Ion cried, astounded. For a vampire who boasted superhuman reaction time to be bitten by a human girl — and for said vampire to then cry out in pain — was pitiful.

But there was no time for his assailant to consider the strangeness of his reaction. The instant his strength slackened, she flipped up her shotgun. She struck the butt of the wooden stock directly into the boy's shoulder bandage.

With a shrill cry of pain, the vampire bent backward. His pretty face twisted in severe pain. Tears were visible at the corners of his eyes.

Meanwhile, Esther flexed the lower half of her body and shook off the vampire. She rolled backward, taking advantage of that momentum to stand in an acrobatic motion. Then, it was her turn to lean over the boy who'd fallen on the floor.

"Don't move!" Esther ordered.

If the nasty teachers who'd hazed her for five months had been watching, they would have cried with joy and pride. According to the latest battle manual, her next move should be to sit her butt down on the stomach of the boy who was writhing in pain, restraining both the enemy's arms with her legs and aiming the muzzle of her shotgun squarely between the vampire's eyes.

"Don't move, vampire! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I arrest you!" Esther warned him in a loud tone, resting her finger properly on the trigger this time. "The charges are murder, blood theft, arson, and many other crimes against humanity. Surrender quietly!"

"Kill me, Terran . . ." The vampire gasped painfully, still angry. His wound had opened. The stains seeping into the white bandage grew larger. But, teeth gritted, the boy didn't cry out. "Did you think we proud nobles of the Empire would endure the humiliation of being caught by Terran?"

"Proud? Why did that proud nobility kill the programmer, who couldn't even escape, and attack such a splendid person as Caterina?" Esther asked, at the same time thinking, *Should I just pull the trigger now?* The stench of the charred corpse and the rows of crosses in her hometown's graveyard appeared in her mind's eye, and Esther raged: "I don't know your name, but I know you're nothing more than a filthy terrorist! I won't let you have your way!"

"I won't let you have your way, either, Terran," said a voice thick with hostility and eloquence. Esther blanched. "Damn." *There was another one?* Her gun still trained on the boy, she shifted her gaze to the doorway, where a blue-haired young man stood.

The blade of a sharp short sword glittered in his hand. "Take that toy away from Ion, Terran." The young man's fangs peeked out from the edges of his thin lips.

Esther had the advantage. She could pull the trigger before he could get to her with that sword. But vampires had dreadful strength and speed—if she killed the vampire within her sights, her head would be severed from her body in the next instant.

"Never mind me, Radu!" the boy Esther was holding down cried out in Imperial language.

"Negotiations with the Vatican are an absolute failure! Already, I can't return to the Empire! Radu, kill this one and return home by yourself!" Ion instructed.

"You be quiet, Ion. Now, Terran, you must have heard my warning. Put down that weapon and get off him," Radu demanded, his hand steadily rising. It might be possible for a Methuselah to throw the short sword faster than she could pull the trigger.

He fixed his aim. If he cut off her fingers before lopping off her head...

The sound of a cocking handgun clicked behind Radu. "You put down the weapon," Abel said.

"If you throw that, I'll have my revenge—quite thoroughly, too." The percussion revolver grasped in the silver-haired priest's hand was aimed squarely at the blue-haired young man.

"Father Nightroad!" Esther gave a joyful shout. "Where in the world have you been?"

"There was something I wanted to investigate a bit. Never mind that, Esther—please, stand up slowly and come over here. Yes, please don't be too hasty," Abel instructed Esther in his usual carefree manner.

"Father, these two seem to be nobles from the Empire," Esther said as she retreated to Abel's side. She kept her shotgun fixed on the blond vampire, ready to shoot at any time.

"I think I'll take them to the embassy for interrogation. How should we transport them? If it's this sunny outside—"

"Would you mind leaving us alone for a little while, Esther?" Abel asked, removing the shotgun from Esther's hands using his terrible strength.

"Wh-what are you doing, Father?" Esther cried out in consternation as she looked up into Abel's face.

Suddenly, he slapped her cheek.

"What?" At first, Esther didn't understand what had happened to her. Then, as the pain gradually reached her brain, she blinked.

"I'm certain I told you to wait outside." The priest spoke quietly, his hand still resting on the side of the girl's face. The warm expression hadn't vanish from his face. His eyes, however ... a fierce light was shining there that Esther had never seen before.

"And yet, you came inside and did as you pleased — even starting a fight. Who told you to act in such a foolish way?" Abel asked.

"I-I . . ." Esther stuttered, finally falling silent, unable to defend herself even though he'd slapped her. She simply stood there, her mouth agape and her breathing heavy.

"I'm sorry," Abel declared — but his words weren't for the silent girl who looked about to cry. The priest quietly lowered his handgun, ignoring the nun with cruel indifference. After he'd holstered the weapon, he bowed respectfully to the two vampires. "Greetings, noble gentlemen from the Empire. I earnestly beg you to forgive my subordinate's rudeness. I am Abel Nightroad of the Department of Foreign Affairs AX Agency. I have come to safeguard you both, under orders from my superior, Cardinal Caterina Sforza."

"What?" Esther sputtered. *Safeguard vampires — the very monsters who attacked the cardinal?* Esther could barely breathe after hearing Abel's unbelievable words.

Meanwhile, the two vampires — the boy and the young man — stared at the priest as if stumped. For a little while, they exchanged glances. Then, the blond boy spoke aloud:

"'Abel,' you said, Terran? So, you're Cardinal Sforza's retainer?"

"Something like that. Cardinal Sforza is the Minister of the Department of Foreign Affairs," Abel explained.

He was met by silence as the two Methuselah exchanged glances again. This time, they whispered quietly. Actually, the boy rattled off excitedly, and the young man seemed to be calmly soothing him. The private discussion went on for a while, but Abel patiently waited without saying a word.

At last, his patience was rewarded. "We can't trust you" — the blond boy looked at the priest like he'd just chewed an insect — "but for now, we can tell you our names. I'm Ion, Ion Fortuna, a Moldovan nobleman of the New Human Empire, otherwise called Count Memphis. I've come this time as an Imperial envoy to communicate the Imperial will of Her Majesty the Empress of the New Human Empire."

"I'm assistant to the envoy, Radu Barvon. I'm also known as Baron Luxor. I'm an Imperial Crown Chief Inspector." Radu's tone was very restrained, and his language skills were clearly stronger than the boy's.

"Your Excellency Count Memphis, and Your Excellency Baron Luxor," Abel nodded, repeating the names as if etching them into his memory. After that, he pushed up his glasses. "You said you 'came to inform us of the Imperial will of Her Majesty the Empress of the New Human Empire,' but should we regard this visit as a declaration of intent to sit at the negotiating table with my superior?"

"Yes, but . . ." Ion's face twisted as he tried to cradle his bandaged shoulder, "but after all, we can't trust you! You suddenly shot an Imperial messenger the other night and willfully broke into our mansion today!"

"These were mistakes on our part, please excuse us. Truth be known, a Methuselah attacked the embassy directly before Your Excellency's visit. My comrade mistook Your Excellency for that assailant, explaining why he shot you," Abel explained.

"What? An attack?" The blond vampire's eyebrows drew together. "Are you saying there was another Methuselah besides us then?" Ion asked.

"Yes, would you happen to know him?"

"A Methuselah besides us . . ." The blue-haired young man spoke to himself, his eyes troubled. Throwing a glance at the boy, he whispered quietly. "Ion, the hard-liners couldn't be in this city...?"

"Hard-liners? You said 'hard-liners,' Baron, what does that mean?" Suddenly, the priest shut his mouth and perked up his ears. He lifted his face as if he'd noticed something.

Radu also frowned slightly, turning his face to the window.

"What?" Ion frowned at both of them.

Only Esther, who'd been standing there feeling dejected the whole time, drooped her head as if she hadn't notice anything in particular.

"What's the matter, Abel? Radu, what are you looking at?" Ion queried.

"Look out, get down!" Abel shouted.

As soon as Abel uttered the warning, Radu pulled the boy to the floor. A half second later, Abel pushed Esther down. A moment after that, a roar shook the room.

Protected by the cover of his friend, the boy moaned, "Wh-what is this?"

The nun gave a voiceless scream from beneath the priest.

The floor tilted, and then it rumbled up and down like a mixer, plaster falling from the ceiling like rain.

"Is this an earthquake?" Ion asked.

Abel replied, "No, it's not an earthquake. It's —"

Cracks like spiderwebs ran through the reinforced glass of the windows, and the priest clucked his tongue quietly as he took in the damage.

In the middle of this gaudy, high-class residential district, a lump of steel about the size of a small mountain appeared suddenly. It was a huge tank, equipped with fat machine guns, each nine feet tall; white smoke trailed from the thick cannons in front. Soldiers wearing the Vineam Domini badge marched beside that calamitous large steel beast.

"A Goliath and the Carabinieri! The Department of Inquisition has come already?" The priest moaned, aghast, a ferocious undertone to his words.

The multi-cannon tank turned sharply and charged at the mansion like a mad buffalo. Something collapsed downstairs, and a roar rang out like that from a wounded beast.

"Uh-oh . . . Your Excellency, is there an escape route?" Abel asked.

A strike force of special police already was invading the mansion from the hole that the tank had gouged out of the wall. With an unusually worried face, Abel turned back toward the two vampires. It was broad daylight — direct rays of UV light would roast them within three seconds.

"Isn't there some underground escape route?" he repeated.

"There's the underground aqueduct below! We can go directly to the emergency stairs of the mansion next door!" It was Radu who responded; Ion was struck dumb. While helping his wounded friend up, Radu explained hastily, "If we follow the underground aqueducts to the caves at the shore, we'll find a boat ready there!"

"Then, let's go — if we don't hurry, this place —"

"Wait, Radu!" Ion's sharp voice interrupted their conversation. Cradling his blood-soaked bandage, the boy sneered hatefully.

"Don't trust what this Terran says! He means to catch us unprepared and kill us!"

Abel frowned. "Your Excellency, I swear, we —"

"Shut up! How can I trust the vows of a Terran?" The blood seeping from Ion's shoulder was staining the boy's hand red. He bared his fangs. "You Terran are always telling so many lies, finding out our weaknesses, stabbing us in the back when we least expect it. That's your way of doing things!"

"Ion, just this once, I think we should heed what he's saying," Radu countered.

The boy froze in disbelief.

"Think about it. If these two people were cooperating with those soldiers, would they deliberately try to stall the assault?" Radu argued.

"B-but—" As he gazed up into his taller friend's face, Ion wanted to object, but he seemed to understand that the situation was urgent. "Shit, it's unavoidable! Do what you like!"

Peevishly stomping across the innocent floor, the boy shook his head. "But remember this: I don't trust you, not at all!"

"Thank you. Your Excellency," Abel offered. He was probably afraid that if he said too much, his companions' feelings would change again. He urged them: "Head for the caves where the boat is hidden. Sister Esther will guide you to Cardinal Sforza's location from there," Abel instructed.

"Me?" Esther's eyes popped open. She pointed to herself as she stared up at Abel. "M-me?"

"Yes," Abel said in his normal, quiet voice. There seemed to remain hardly any of the cold anger in his eyes. "Please, take these two safely to Caterina."

"W-wait a minute, what about you, Father?"

"I'll keep them busy here for a little while. His Excellency the Count is wounded. I'll need to buy a little time," Abel answered calmly, drawing his handgun.

It was getting noisy downstairs.

"If the Inquisition takes these two into custody, it's the end. Esther, somehow, you must lead them to Caterina," Abel declared.

"Is it really all right?" Esther asked. "Father, I thought you didn't trust me?"

"Huh? Not trust you? About what?" The wrinkles carved into Abel's cheeks were getting deeper and deeper.

Esther repeated the question, irritation bubbling up in her for some reason: "But a little while ago, I came in on my own, and I ruined the mission – aren't you still angry, Father?"

"I was angry, but who cares about the mission?" Strength filled Abel's hand as he tightly grasped his rosary. The priest spoke to the young nun as if to persuade her. "I was angry because you did a dangerous thing, going into a Methuselah mansion alone, Esther. Don't you understand what a foolish thing you did? You were nearly killed! What a reckless thing ..." The priest scolded as he smiled with embarrassment.

Does this man think he's my guardian or something? she wondered. "But I was worried about letting you go alone! And weren't you skimping on your work?" Esther asked.

"Skimping on my work? Me? When? I skimmed on my work?"

"When? Isn't it always?" Despite the dangerous situation, her emotions got the best of her. Esther spat out a few days' worth of stored-up humiliation: "Yes! It's always like that! Always joking around, skimping on your work, and trying to have as much fun as possible! Even though you were so strong in Istavan, the day before yesterday, you acted like you were a mere civilian! How can I trust a person who's unwilling to be serious? Why should I listen when you say 'leave it to me'?"

"Um, Esther, it isn't that I'm particularly unwilling to use my power . . ."

"Well, then why – why didn't you use your abilities like you did in Istavan? You should be able to beat any opponent, so why?"

"No."

"What?" The hostility radiating off the soldiers downstairs rapidly escalated.

As if he didn't notice that – or he noticed but ignored it – the priest gave a displeased sigh.

"Actually, I don't want to quarrel with you in a place like this, but I, too, have my orders. If I ignore my superior's instructions and abandon my duty, I'll have such a hard time of it later!"

"Don't talk nonsense! Do as I say! Who do you think is more dangerous – your superior, who isn't here, or us?"

"Ah, definitely my superior," Abel replied without a second's hesitation. "When she gets angry, there's nothing scarier in this world. Once, I miscalculated my expense account and ran up too many charges. She smiled thinly and said, 'Now that I think about it, I wonder

how much I can sell one of your kidneys for?' From time to time, I still have nightmares about it."

"Stupid priest, making fun of us." The commanding officer glared at Abel as he cradled his head as if traumatized. "Never mind this fool. Charge! If he resists, shoot to kill!"

Following their superior's orders, the advance guard began to move. Hefting their carbines, they ran up the stairs. That movement was really splendid, reminiscent of an exercise carried out by well-trained attack dogs.

"Oh dear, it's come to this, after all?" But Abel, tucked in a corner of the railing, showed no signs of fear. He shook his head and raised his handgun. He aimed away from the charging Carabinieri, however, instead pointing the gun toward the ceiling.

"Ha, idiot. Where are you aiming?" the superior officer jeered. But his chuckles turned to screams the instant the electric wires that had been suspended from the ceiling fell into the water puddles soaking the stairs.

Aside from devices that used lost technology from before the Armageddon, most modern household electric systems barely had enough power to light arc lamps, much less electrocute a person. But the trick effectively tangled up the charging police, preventing them from getting up the stairs. They curled into balls, stumbling over one another as they fell down to the first floor.

"Shit, a cheeky trick!" It was understandable that the superior officer would be in a bad mood: These stairs were the only way to ascend to the second floor of the mansion.

"The electric power! Cut off the power main!"

"Whoops, I can't let you do that," Abel interjected. He could see the entire first-floor hall from his spot on the second floor. Abel let just his gun muzzle peek out from where it was still hidden in a nook of the handrail. He lightly fired in front of the fleeing bunch. "Please don't come any farther. I don't have much confidence in my aim, and I might actually hit you." The priest sighed as he murmured to himself, "Hmm, well, at any rate, I can buy time this way."

That Methuselah, Ion, was wounded, so Abel wanted to allow him extra time. *Now then, what shall I say next to provoke them?* While Abel was racking his brains . . .

"What are you all playing at here?" asked a voice that sounded like the grating of rusty metal.

An ill wind blew over Abel's head. The wind, which had enough force to flutter his cassock sleeves, somehow severed the dangling electric wires. Making a slow circle, the air current returned to the lower floor.

A tall shadow suddenly appeared there, hovering in the air. "You should all retreat," said the voice.

The hovering figure wore an ash-colored monk's cloak that covered him to his feet. The figure's sex wasn't immediately apparent, but its low voice echoed from the helmet that covered everything but its mouth. "That man is an agent, a talented individual from the Department of Foreign Affairs. You cannot possibly match his powers. Leave this to me."

"Now then, who are you?" Abel asked, still crouching near the corner of the handrail. He already knew the answer — the question was meant to buy time, which was probably useless now that he faced this particular enemy.

"I am Chief Inquisitor Brother Petro, also called II Ruinante." Grasping an iron rod that matched his own height, the ash-colored monk gave his name. "Subordinate, I am in the middle of a public peace operation following a criminal attack on Cardinal Sforza. If you are also a member of the Vatican, you should use good judgment and cooperate in our holy mission. Now, make way there."

There was no hint of menace in the man's rusty voice — merely a supreme self-confidence that vouched for his strengths and achievements.

Abel, however, shook his head nonchalantly in response. "No."

"What?" A ring of disbelief filled the monk's voice.

"Unfortunately, I'm searching for that criminal, too. I won't let you usurp the distinguished service of capturing such a collar. Won't you please ask the outsiders to withdraw?" Abel asked.

"Oh, ho," Petro called out. For some reason, Petro seemed oddly happy at Abel's refusal, which was soiled with bureaucracy and sectionalism. "So, are you saying you won't give way no matter what, Nighthead or whoever you are?"

"Might I suggest that you consult an otolaryngologist before coming here?" Abel asked.

The monk hoisted his arm in the air, his gaze flashing his homicidal intent toward the priest.

Abel merely nodded, encouraging him.

"Interesting!" Petro responded.

A strange, high-pitched sound spilled forth from both ends of the iron rod, which Petro was using like a hammer — it sounded like the revolutions of an internal, high-frequency wheel. That probably accounted for the "wind" that had cut the electrical cables. It was an extremely dangerous weapon, especially considering the monk was able to throw the wheel alone, which revolved at an ultra-high speed with wire guidance.

While making the hammer—which might weigh one hundred pounds—revolve over his head, Il Ruinante shouted, "God guides me! His sword accompanies me. With the help of God, I will not be defeated! If you say you will hinder my holy task, our fight is unavoidable! You will become a corpse, agent!"

V

A high-pressure wind struck Abel's face. The monk closed in, the hammer whirring and roaring like a demon as it revolved at an unbelievable speed. "Ha ha! Thank you, Nighthead!" Petro laughed, "I finally get to have a bout with you agents this once!"

There was a slight pause, allowing Abel to hurriedly kick off the floor as he watched the oncoming assault. The high-frequency wheel sped by, revolving at a high velocity as it grazed his eyelashes. Tiny silver hairs danced in the air, but the evil weapon had missed striking its prey. Instead, it bit deeply into the wall and stuck there pitifully. Because of the high-frequency vibrations, the surrounding plaster crumbled into powder, leaving a gaping hole in the wall — beyond that peeked a sheer cliff, which connected directly to the sea far below.

"Wo-ho! Well, you dodged one blow from my Screamer," Petro acceded. He yanked the hammer, pulverizing the wall face as if he were digging in a garden with a hoe. Then, the Screamer's other tip twisted up and began closing in on the priest.

"Ack!" Abel bent backward as if he were boneless and barely dodged the attack. The Screamer grazed the tip of his nose before driving into a pillar next to the stairwell with excessive force. The stone pillar, which was probably as wide as two outstretched arms, was severed like dry wood. It fell, rolling into the hall. The floor caved in with a boom that shook the whole mansion, and screams arose from among the police as they dodged flying shards of debris.

"Damn you, Nighthead! How dare you endanger my subordinates!" Petro screamed.

"No, that was your —

"No use arguing!" II Ruinante gave an angry roar at the pitiful scene downstairs. Simultaneously, he kicked the floor with violent energy.

"Oh, it's rude not to listen to what someone else has to say," Abel cocked his gun at Petro, who charged down the corridor with steps so heavy that they made the ground rumble.

These two opponents were basically on the same side, so if possible, Abel didn't want to hurt Petro—however, he also wanted to avoid becoming mincemeat himself. With the intention of minimizing the monk's battle strength, he aimed for his opponent's shoulder.

"Forgive me. This will hurt a bit, but you can bear it!"

Petro didn't even try to avoid the gunshot—there was no need: Although it had been accurately aimed to hit his shoulder, the bullet suddenly flew in the opposite direction with a clear pinging sound.

"Ha, a tepid attack!" Petro declared.

Abel's eyes grew round. A bulletproof vest and the artificial skin of a mechanical soldier had repelled his ammo. "What? That's impossible! That was a full load!"

"Why are you so surprised? Is that all you've got?" Petro taunted.

Abel simply stood there aghast.

Both of II Ruinante's arms brandished the hammer aloft. If such a weapon were to strike Abel, he'd have difficulty maintaining his original form. Cautiously, he jumped back, aiming his gun at Petro's unprotected stomach "Huh!" Abel softly exhaled overtop his gun. He employed a highly skilled technique that made it possible for him to shoot his gun as rapidly as an automated machine gun, simply by pulling the trigger at the same time he raised the hammer. The five armored bullets fired in succession with hardly any lag time. The rounds assaulted the Chief Inquisitor's stomach all at once.

I don't know what kind of bulletproof material he's using, but that would cause a shock to his body even if his body armor were to stop the bullets. If his internal organs are damaged, he won't be able to move for a little while.

But the bullets didn't reach their target. Just before impact, the monk's robe swelled, repelling all the bullets. "Wh-what?" Abel cried.

"Hmm. You're very skilled, but guns can't harm me!" Still brandishing the Screamer, Petro gave a fearless smile. Then, a dazzling light flashed as Petro tore off his tattered monk's robe. Again, the priest's eyes opened wide. "This . . ." The Chief Inquisitor's body was covered with shining, silvery-white armor — and it was no ordinary armor, considering the static electric motors humming on all its parts. Four delicate manipulators protruded from Petro's back, brandishing four shields with painted Roman crosses.

"An armored battle suit? But — "

"This isn't just an armored battle suit. It's my personal autonomous-style battle assist system: the Garb of the Lord. Yes, any kind of attack is powerless against it!" Petro gave a triumphant shout as his four shields deployed to protect their master. "Well, what will you do, agent? Go ahead and try to break through my Garb's defenses!"

"Th-this individual is spouting madness!" Abel stuttered as he narrowly escaped a sideways blow by jumping back. Abel knew he couldn't turn on his heels and flee — he had his hands full just replacing his emptied cylinder. Then, while still unilaterally on the defensive, he noticed quite suddenly that he'd been pressed back to the edge of the stairs.

"Shit, that was weak," Abel muttered. The priest cried toward heaven. "God, what in the world should I do against this ridiculous — huh?"

"Where are you looking, Nightroad?" Petro called.

Abel spotted danger twirling over his head. Then, it got very dark.

Petro brandished the hammer high, preparing to lay a fatal blow to his enemy. "Now, it ends! God, drive him away beneath your heaven, and destroy him with your anger. Amen!"

"Heaven helps those who help themselves. Amen!" Abel countered.

As the evil weapon descended, revolving at incredible speed, Abel jumped out of range. However, there was no corridor behind him, nowhere to escape.

"Ha! Stupid, useless struggling—you disappoint me . . . Wh-whoa!" The Chief Inquisitor cried out in consternation.

Thick cables wrapped around the hammer. The priest grasped the other end of them and yanked.

Dragged by the priest's body weight, Petro stumbled a few steps—and then, tripping over a stair, he fell head over heels.

"Got you!" Abel let go of the cables and grasped the handrail. While supporting his body weight with just his left arm, with his right hand he aimed his gun at Petro's right shoulder, where there was a chink in his armor. Abel fired bullets in quick succession; the rounds demolished the joint, and Petro's body fell upside-down into the hall.

A tense silence followed.

Tremendous dust clouds danced up.

Thrown to the stone floor, the Chief Inquisitor didn't so much as twitch. His right arm, bent backward, convulsed once.

"Chief!"

The Carabinieri screamed as they looked at their pitifully beaten superior. Countless gun muzzles concentrated on the priest at the top of the stairs.

"Avenge the chief! Shoot the agent! Kill him!"

Suddenly, an angry bellow—like the roar of a wounded lion—stopped the soldiers: "Wait! This is a holy duel between me and that man! I won't let anyone else interfere!"

The Chief Inquisitor stood up. His right arm hung limply from his armpit, but he didn't seem to notice or care.

"I must apologize, Father Nightroad," Petro called out sincerely to his opponent on the stairs, "I seem to have underestimated you, at any rate. I regard this disgrace as God's punishment for such pride."

"Huh? I admire your fairness, but . . ." As he gazed down at the discontented soldiers, Abel shrugged his shoulders. "Can't I persuade you to give up now? You don't want to lose another arm, do you?"

"Oh, this time, it seems you've underestimated *me*." Petro removed a small bottle from a bag, his eyes still flashing with hostility inside his helmet. "I must warn you that, from here on out, I won't hold back."

The small bottle was probably an ampoule of something. A blue liquid lapped at the bottle's transparent sides in small waves.

The Chief Inquisitor, a reinforced soldier, inserted that small bottle into an injection port in his neck.

Abel frowned. "Did you need anesthetic? Perhaps it would be better to send you to a hospital?"

"Oh, I'll go to the hospital." Petro's stout body began to shake. "But it'll be to throw you in the morgue!"

There was a momentary pause. Then, in the next instant, Abel doubted his own eyes: The monk had disappeared. There was no sign of the Chief Inquisitor.

"Disappeared? Crazy ..."

"Here I am, Nightroad," Petro sneered from behind the priest.

Abel's hand turned of its own accord. His trigger finger moved faster than he could twist his body. The bullet flew off with a roar, heading straight toward the monk's helmet. Unfortunately, all the bullet gouged was a mosaic on the wall. Once again, Abel's enemy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are you aiming?" Petro taunted.

When Abel turned around, the monk was so close that Abel could feel the man's breath on his face. If the priest hadn't lost his balance and fallen down, Petro's weapon would have sliced off his head. Instead, the wall beside him broke open.

"Wh-what is it now? Movements like that..." Abel couldn't find a sign of his enemy, who moved just like —

"Just like a vampire's 'haste mode,' isn't it?" Petro asked.

The priest tried to stand, but he was kicked in the stomach. Abel's doubled-over body flew a good ten feet before his back struck the wall. He gasped from severe pain. His stomach lining probably had split, if the red drops of blood mixed in with his vomit were any indication.

"I took a booster that accelerates the nervous system's transmission speed," Petro leisurely explained as he prepared to kick the priest again. "It's something we originally developed in our Department of Inquisition to cope with the vampires' haste mode, but this is the first time I've used it in an actual fight. Consider it an honor, Father Nightroad,"

Unable to speak due to internal damages, the priest merely moaned pitifully, barely standing on trembling legs.

One blow of the hammer, too fast to see, struck his chest directly. The sound of his breastbone cracking echoed throughout the mansion. His torso wasn't torn to pieces — but that was simply because the high-frequency wheel hadn't been moving. Now, the hammer revolved in mid-air, and it struck directly below Abel's ear, at the root of his jaw.

The priest fell on his back again. Beyond him, another big hole in the wall opened like a carnivorous beast's maw. He dove through that hole, tumbling down to the sea far below, his body streaming a bright trail of blood.

"You did it!" The Carabinieri, who'd been watching the duel with bated breath, gave a cheer. "It's perfectly splendid, Your Excellency!"

"No," Petro quieted the Carabinieri as they came running up the stairs to congratulate him. His voice held a ring of disappointment as he looked down at the waves that had swallowed the priest's body. "I expected a little more from somebody calling himself an agent. How stupid! He was no match for me!"

"That's true. No enemy in this world could match Your Excellency, the strongest knight in the Vatican," the superior officer bragged as he gazed down at the cliff below.

A good sixty feet below, the sea's white waves washed up against the ledge of the shore. Although they couldn't spot a corpse there, they knew Abel couldn't have survived.

"Hmph, the nerve of that priest to strike a department chief! That damned idiot didn't know his place!" the officer remarked.

"Don't ridicule the dead. He was also a man who lived for the church, God, and faith," Petro countered.

"Huh?" the officer responded, confused.

Petro earnestly lectured the Carabinieri chief, who frowned as if bewildered: "Although he fought us because of a stupid dispute about domain between our departments — and because of his own hopeless stupidity — that doesn't change the fact that he was working for God and the church, and he wholeheartedly believed he was following orders. As a person who serves the same God, my duty is to forgive him after the battle is done and pray for his soul. Love God and your enemy. Amen."

"Yes, sir."

Unaware of the officer's disgusted look, Petro forcefully commanded his troops, "Well, we've wasted enough time on a stupid matter! Everybody, begin the search! Hunt down the criminal vampire! Get the monster that attacked Cardinal Sforza!"

VI

"Damn!" The blue-haired young man shouted as the three of them reached the underground harbor.

The yacht moored beyond the pier was a medium-sized boat used for open ocean sailing. The windows were black because they were composed of anti-UV glass.

The boy who'd crossed the pier turned around to address Radu. "What's wrong, tovarich?"

"I made a mistake. I dropped the key to the boat somewhere," Radu replied, clucking his tongue worriedly as he searched his bag. "It can't be helped. I'll go back and look for it. Ion, you get on the boat with this Terran. I'll be right back."

"Oh, Baron of Luxor! Please, wait!" Esther called after Radu, who turned back disconcertedly. "It's dangerous to go back. We must escape quickly!"

"I know, I know—but I dropped the key to the boat. I think it's probably on the stairs. Miss, you can take care of Ion in my absence."

"Radu . . ." The blond boy regarded his friend, suddenly feeling lonely. "Be careful. Don't do anything rash."

"I'll be right back." The blue-haired young man kindly placed his hand on the boy's head. In the next instant, his figure disappeared as if he'd been nothing more than a daydream. The Methuselah special ability known as "haste mode" abnormally stimulated the vampires' nervous systems to increase the reaction speed to ten times normal.

"Well, let's go, Your Excellency." Picking up the lantern again, Esther urged along the boy who was biting his nails anxiously. "We'll get on the boat while we wait."

The boy didn't reply, he merely pouted, knitting his brow in displeasure. Suddenly, he collapsed on the spot.

"Your Excellency?" Esther extended a hand in concern.

Ion's small body trembled on the pier, and he was breathing harshly. His face was bright red, and not just because he'd been running.

"Wh-what's the matter? Oh, no! You have a high fever!" Esther realized, surprised by the heat of the boy's skin.

"Don't touch me!" Ion hissed, violently shaking off the girl's hand. His voice was weak, though, perhaps because of the fever. "I don't want to be touched by Terran!"

"All the same, what'll we do? You need help."

The boy glared at her with the eyes of an untamed wildcat.

Kneeling by his side, Esther was at a loss. This extremely difficult mission was dangerous, but she was more troubled by the weakness of the boy before her eyes. He was one of the strongest monsters on the face of the Earth, provided with an immortal lifespan and an immunity that surpassed that of any creature on the higher end of the evolution chain. He was a vampire, and vampires were unimaginably strong, standing at the apex of the entire food chain. At least, the vampires Esther had fought in her homeland were like that, as it seemed was the young man called Radu, who'd been here until a little while ago. So, what was causing Ion's weakness? Wasn't he almost the same as a human in his current state?

"Um, I think maybe that wound in your shoulder has opened," Esther offered, extending her hand. Should she treat him the same way as a human? "I can't suck out the poison, but

even if I just change the bandage, I think you'll feel much better. Would you mind taking off your robes so I can change the dressing?"

"I told you not to touch me, Terran!" Baring his fangs, the boy sprang away from Esther. He hadn't forgotten his previous humiliation. With a resentful look, he glared up at her.

"Common Terran aren't allowed to soil my noble self!"

"Common?" *Look who's talking: a living monster who drinks people's blood!* Adrenaline coursed through Esther's veins. *Why should I, a person serving God, even have to care for this kind of cursed monster in the first place—much less when subjected to this kind of ungrateful abuse?*

"I don't exactly want to take care of a sick child like you! Wounded people are a burden!" Esther complained. Her guilty conscience and resentment made the nun forget herself—before she knew it, Esther was shouting, grabbing the boy by his collar. "But it can't be helped, now can it?"

"A *burden*? And to boot, you call me a 'child'?" Ion asked indignantly.

He'd probably resigned himself to being called a monster, but he'd undoubtedly never imagined a common Terran would refer to him as a "child" and a "burden." Ion looked bewildered.

Esther shook his collar and hurled another accusation at him. "Are you saying I'm wrong? You wouldn't have been able to run this far if your friend hadn't helped you! And now, you can't even stand on your own two legs! I don't know what they call it in your country, but I call it a burden!"

"Ugh! Damn you!" His face reddened by anger and shame, the boy bared his fangs.

Instantly, Esther let go of his collar and took a defensive posture.

But the boy's slender form collapsed; he fell to his knees, sinking down to the pier, groaning.

"Oh, no! Are you okay?" Esther cried, back to herself again. If she hadn't extended her hand, Ion might have rolled into the sea. The nun hurriedly caught the boy's body, which felt light enough to cause her sadness. "I'm sorry, I suddenly got offended and I ... I'm really sorry."

The boy stared in disgust as she supported him, but he didn't try to make her unhand him this time. Instead, he said, "I'll give you special permission to change my bandage." Twisting his lips peevishly, the vampire ordered her, "Do it carefully, Terran."

"Understood," Esther answered, marveling at this bizarre situation. For a servant of God to bandage a vampire's wound, of all things! Suppressing the laughter bubbling up inside her, Esther nodded very seriously. She improvised a bandage out of narrow strips torn from her handkerchief; then, she had the boy take off his robe.

Quietly, she instructed, "If you'll please just lift your arms this way, I'll take off the bandage. Yes, stay just like that—Wh-what's this? How terrible!" Under the bandage, the gunshot wound was bigger than she'd expected, it gaped open wide on his thin shoulder.

Esther apologized in a weak voice while she wiped away the blood. "I'm so sorry."

"What for?" The boy's manner of speech indicated he suspected that she was planning something. Peering sullenly into the nun's tense face, he repeated: "Why are you apologizing?"

"I touched you here a little while ago. It must've hurt."

"That couldn't be helped," Ion replied.

He isn't going to be angry and start yelling again? Contrary to Esther's expectation, Ion shook his head with unexpected frankness.

"A little while ago, I tried to kill you, too. You have no reason to go easy on me. That Terran the night before last was unforgivable, though! He shot me—an envoy—without listening to what I had to say! I won't forgive that!"

"Oh, but Father Tres had no choice." Esther explained the situation to her new comrade while wrapping the handkerchief around the boy's shoulder. "Just before you arrived, a vam—er, a Methuselah attacked at the embassy, killing someone. After that, anybody would've been wary to find a Methuselah near Cardinal Sforza."

"Oh, now that you mention it, that Terran in glasses said the same thing—that a Methuselah attacked just before my arrival." Ion frowned in pain as he gave the matter thought. He put his hand to his chin as if remembering something. "You should tell me about that in detail, Esther. It might've been the act of a hard-liner."

"A hard-liner? Ah, what the other gentleman was talking about before?" While making a tight knot to finish the bandage, Esther cocked her head. "What is that?"

"Hard-liners are malcontents who disobey the will of Her Majesty the Empress and fight with you Terran." The boy muttered the last word as if spitting out something filthy.

"There were those who were dissatisfied with the Imperial order for me to come here as an envoy, and I've heard there are those among the Boyar who want a war no matter what and who are secretly planning to disrupt our mission."

"They want war? Wait! Then, your Empress—then, Imperial order is—"

"Secure!" A rough man's voice called out directly below them. At the same time, multiple hands reached from under the pier, grabbing Esther's and Ion's limbs.

"What?" Esther cried out.

Sturdy arms pinned the girl down painlessly. She turned her head reflexively. That instant, men in black rubber suits and snorkels jumped up out of the black water's surface and flew into Esther's field of vision. They seemed to have been lurking in the water the whole time, waiting for a chance to strike.

"What are these Terran doing here?" Ion was struggling desperately against the four or five men who had jumped on him. When one of the men hit his bandaged shoulder sharply, the boy gave a strangled cry.

"Don't be violent!" Esther cried. With both hands behind her back and her face still pressed to the pier, Esther pleaded desperately. "He's hurt! Don't be violent!"

"Who are you? Why is a nun in a place like this?" the commander inquired. The man wore a Vineam Domini coat of arms on his rubber suit. He peered into Esther's face suspiciously. "Answer the question, girl! Why are a vampire and a nun here together? Are you a vampire, too?"

His question was met with stunned silence.

A cry of pain leaked from Esther's mouth as the man twisted her arms behind her back. Her elbow joints made a nasty creaking sound.

Ion screamed, "S-stop! That woman is a Terran, same as you! She's not a Methuselah!"

"You shut up!" the commander declared.

A silver-tipped harpoon gun struck the side of Ion's face. With a scream of pain, Ion coughed up blood. Fragments of broken molars rolled on the pier.

"What'll we do, Commander?" the Carabinieri who'd struck the boy asked the man standing beside Esther. "According to the informant, this kid should be the only vampire. Should we dispose of that girl here, too?"

Informant? Her face pale with pain, Esther repeated the man's words in her mind. *Somebody leaked information to the Department of Inquisition? So, it's no coincidence that these guys were waiting here?*

"No, don't kill the girl — or the vampire," ordered the commander. He shook his head while steadily applying more pressure to Esther's joints. "We'll take them back alive. There are various things I want to ask them. I'll get them to talk in the interrogation room of the Raguel." The commander ran his fingers along the nape of Esther's neck while twisting his lips into a sadistic sneer. His fingers pushed on the spot where nerves clustered under the base of her neck, causing her severe pain. Looking down at the poor girl with a lecherous grin, the man ordered his subordinates: "Inject that vampire with silver nitrate solution. It'd be a problem if he became violent. This girl is a nuisance. She may try to escape. Somebody give me a knife, and I'll carry her after I cut her tendons."

The inquisition soldiers were known to be sadistic, but this bunch seemed to be especially evil. A hypodermic pierced Ion's arm as a sharp knife was held to Esther's wrists.

Forced to watch, she screamed, "S-stop!"

"You can bear it," the commander sneered. Unsheathing his short sword, he snickered. Then, he went up in flames.

The fireball that flew out of the darkness struck his face. Having become a human torch, he opened his mouth in a silent scream, throwing himself backward, his limbs spasming. He lost his balance and fell toward the water's surface, but the fire didn't go out even after he fell in. The human-shaped lump of flame sank toward the sea bottom, spraying water and embers in his wake.

Not one Carabinieri saw it happen, though, because they, too, had sparked up, one after another, becoming bright flashes in the darkness. The ten soldiers burst into flame atop the pier. They were wearing rubber suits that clung to their bodies, but that only made their bad luck more profound. Their whole bodies were rapidly wrapped in flames, and they each fell down, unable even to scream. The stench of scorching flesh filled the night air.

Still prone, Esther gazed at the blue-white flashes. "These flames —"

"Radu!" Upon seeing his friend's shadow standing beyond the darkness, Ion gave a joyful shout. Still holding his struck cheek, he stood up, tottering. "You saved me, tovarich!"

"You're not hurt, Ion?" With calmness that contrasted his friend's joy, the blue-haired young man walked over to them. "Sorry that I was a little late."

"Never mind. Did you get the key?" Ion asked.

"Yeah. Look, it's here." The young man smiled kindly and pressed the key into Ion's hand. His gaze was so gentle, it was unthinkable that this vampire had moments ago killed eleven — no, *twelve* people.

"Your Excellency, please step away from Baron Luxor," Esther ordered. Drawing the handgun from the folds of her skirt, Esther continued stiffly: "I know who the 'informant' they mentioned a little while ago is."

"What?" Ion turned around, regarding Esther suspiciously. Seeing her weapon pointed at his friend, he raised his voice: "Terran, what do you mean by this?"

Ignoring the boy's angry voice, Esther addressed the silent Radu. Sweat dripped down the side of her face. "Baron Luxor, when you spoke of that hard-liner before, you were referring to yourself."

"Don't talk nonsense, Esther! I won't allow a lowly Terran to suspect my good friend without cause!" Ion shouted and spread both hands as if to protect Radu. "Weren't you watching just now? Didn't he save us?"

"He didn't save MS — he merely killed *them*." The height difference between the boy and the young man was lucky, Esther thought as she aimed her gun over Ion's head and between Radu's eyes. She shook her head and continued, "Maybe the reason he killed them was because they were taking us away alive. Maybe he wanted you, his senior, to be

killed by human hands, thereby strengthening the Imperial nobles' hatred. In that case, he couldn't allow Count Memphis to be taken alive. Am I wrong, Baron Luxor?"

"What are you saying, Terran!" Ion addressed her accusation with indignation. "You'd better wake up from your delusion! Radu wouldn't do such a thing — "

"It's as she says, Ion," Radu admitted with a defiant yet somehow relieved look in his bronze eyes. He peered down into his companion's face. "It's all as the Terran says."

"Radu . . . ?" Forgetting to breathe or blink, Ion looked up at the man who he'd considered his best friend. He'd never seen Radu's eyes lit that way.

The blue-haired Methuselah shrugged his shoulders. "The Terran are completely useless. I deliberately informed them of the location of the mansion and this underground harbor, and everything would've worked out fine if they'd quietly killed the Vampire terrorist' — but no, they showed interest in taking you back alive, and that was troublesome."

"Radu!" Ion cried, unconsciously backing away. His fever-reddened face now paled."! ... It's a lie—a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie! I won't believe it! Please tell me it's a lie, Radu—say it!"

"No, it isn't a lie. It isn't a lie, Ion." Radu shook his head. He continued, explaining rather than boasting, "And I was the one who interfered with your interview with Cardinal Sforza the night before last, as well."

"Why, Radu? Why would you do such a thing?"

"For the future of all Methuselah. Everything I do is for that reason." In contrast to Ion, whose voice violently trembled, the traitorous man was calm and spoke with clarity. "It's impossible for we Methuselah to coexist with Terran. But our Empress wishes us to converse with them. I meant to correct that error in judgment. Do you understand?"

"That's crazy! If that's what you think, why didn't you tell Her Majesty directly, Radu? Did you think you'd get away with this kind of traitorous plot?" Ion wondered.

"I always was envious of your blind obedience, Ion Fortuna, you've always been too compliant for your own good." Radu's manner remained graceful, either because he thought Esther wasn't going to fire on him or because he was ignoring the possibility that the bullet might find its mark. It was hard to find fault with his gentlemanly demeanor — excluding his betrayal, of course.

Radu sighed. "You have talent, pedigree, character—and you're never at fault. You're a pillar of the Empire. Your gaze is always fixed straight ahead; you never look down. Unlike you, the Empress doesn't favor me. I'm not the kind of beloved retainer chosen to be a secret envoy to the Vatican. Do you think Her Majesty would change her mind if / tried advising her? I'm powerless in the Empire. When powerless people want to advance their ideas, they have to change the rules of the game."

"Change the rules?" Ion repeated.

"Yes, change the rules—no, the world. We will renew the world by fire." Radu laughed, gazing at Esther, whose gun wavered at the familiar words. He brought his palms, which had been facing upward, in front of his chest as if trying to grasp something. "Yes, I'm trying to change the rules of engagement in the war between the two races. I won't even hesitate to lie, betray, or kill a friend. Oh, and Ion ..."

There was no time to pull the trigger. Esther blinked away a bead of sweat, and in that instant, Radu disappeared before her eyes. "Damn haste mode!"

A soft voice whispered in her ear: "You made one mistake. This plot isn't 'traitorous.' It's outright *treason*." From behind her, a hand reached out and grabbed her shotgun. The fingers, as white as carved ivory, were slender for a man's hand, but they attached to the nun's fingers with iron firmness anyway.

Like a teacher demonstrating penmanship to a student, Radu moved Esther's gun. "If the cardinal were attacked by a vampire, the Vatican wouldn't keep quiet. And if a messenger were killed by a Vatican employee—especially one in Cardinal Sforza's service— Her Majesty would realize her mistake. It's enough to spark the fire of strife."

"Run, Your Excellency!" Esther struggled against the uncanny strength of the vampire, but in vain: The gun muzzle aimed straight at the petrified boy's cheek.

"Radu, you —"

"Don't say anything more, Ion. I won't make any excuses, either. The man you offered your friendship to is a filthy traitor. You may curse my name as you greet death. Farewell, my friend," Radu concluded.

No one heard Radu's whispered confession except the Terran woman being held in the vampire's arms. That instant, Esther felt Radu's trigger finger tremble slightly. But then, he pulled the trigger as if he'd never felt any hesitation. The shot gouged the darkness, grazing the hair of the boy who stood there in shock.

"What?" Radu exclaimed.

The gun's sights weren't off. Something had rushed past the instant Radu had fired, flipping up the shotgun and sending it flying.

Radu's eyes opened wide. "Who's there?"

The attacker screamed like a banshee and stepped out of the darkness. The shadowed figure stood tall, a long pole poised beside it.

"Now then, what is this?" asked a man wrapped in silvery-white armor, his hammer hefted cautiously. He made a show of looking around. "This provokes my interest, a vampire pointing a gun at a vampire."

"The Chief Inquisitor? You've come already?" Esther asked.

Radu clucked his tongue and, still using Esther to shield his body, aimed his palm at the new enemy—but Brother Petro's hammer was one second faster.

"You coward, using a child for a shield!" Petro hollered. The high-frequency wheel, thrown a second time, grazed Esther's head, directly striking the breastbone of the vampire behind her.

There was only a momentary pause.

Radu's body might have been torn apart if he hadn't instantly thrust Esther away and bent backward. The Methuselah's superior reaction speed and physical strength had saved his life — barely. In the next instant, a blue- white ball of flame hurled with subsonic speed.

"An Efreet? Then, it was you who killed my subordinates!" Petro declared, indicating the burned soldiers. His shield moved automatically, rebuffing the fireball. Petro shouted angrily; he twirled the hammer like a baton, despite the fact that it weighed more than one hundred pounds. "I'll take revenge for my loyal subordinates, who fell in holy battle! Abominable vampire, accept the iron hammer of justice like a man!"

Esther thought she saw Radu's face twist in shock: Petro's shadow had disappeared.

"A Terran with haste mode?" Jumping aside reflexively, Radu created a new fireball.

Then, he heard a shrill buzz and felt a strange tingle in his torso.

"Ugh!" Radu was thrown back, spewing reddish-black liquid from his lips.

The Chief Inquisitor walked through bright flames. "Vampire!" Petro screamed.

He'd failed to dodge the fireball that had been hurled in the crossfire, yet he paid no heed to the flames that enveloped his armored battle suit. Instead, Petro shouted at the Efreet,

"A clever trick for a monster!"

The keening hammer attacked the blue-haired vampire a third time, and Radu raised his hand to block it.

"Run, Your Excellency! Now!" Esther cried. She picked up her shotgun and ran along the pier, pulling the boy's hand. No matter who won the duel, it would be bad news for Ion. Now was their best, and probably final, chance to run away!

"Damn . . . You won't escape, Ion!" Radu called as the boy dashed toward the yacht after the nun.

"Where are you looking, Efreet?" Petro asked. Radu avoided the hammer's attack with a graceful back turn; then, he floated a blue-white light in his hand.

Suddenly, Esther turned around and pulled her shotgun's trigger. Due to the vampire's physical strength, Esther wouldn't have had time to squeeze off a shot once the vampire started hurtling flames.

"God, please help me! Amen!" Esther prayed. The shotgun's recoil threatened to tear the skin between her thumb and index finger. Plus, she knew there was practically zero possibility that her bullet, fired by guesswork, would shoot down the flying fireball. But the next instant, the fireball scattered before the Efreet. "It really hit?" Esther's eyes went wide at her lucky shot. Radu bared his fangs, glaring at her. No, it wasn't Esther whom the Efreet glared at. It was the tall shadow behind her, standing on the deck of the yacht.

"Oh, you're alive?" Petro asked, a bit of joy mixed into his angry tone.

A cassocked priest stood on the deck, water dripping from his long silver hair. The percussion revolver grasped in his hand spewed white smoke.

"Esther, hurry, this way!" Abel called out. Setting his sights on Radu, the priest shouted, "Hurry, you two, get on the boat!"

"You are two lucky little shits," Radu spit. Creating a new light in his hand, Radu glared at their backs as they ran down the pier. "But don't worry, Ion, I won't let you escape!" Radu's hand fluttered.

Suddenly, the hammer, which was revolving over Radu's head, struck the light from his hand. Radu shouted in pain.

As the flames flew apart, Petro's movement ceased for a moment. Seizing the opportunity, the blue-haired vampire sprang at the Chief Inquisitor with a graceful, perhaps even beautiful agility.

"Inconceivable," Petro snarled as Radu charged him.

Using Petro's shoulders as a springboard, Radu flew up in the air as if he were weightless. He bounded toward the yacht, which had begun to depart the pier, calling out, "Die, Ion!"

The wounded boy cowered as this angel of death descended upon him.

Esther, who had taken the helm in the steering room, shouted, "Father!"

A flash of claws swiped at the top of Ion's head.

Only Abel could do something about their attacker.

"Father, shoot!" Esther pleaded.

As if in response to the nun's shout, the muzzle of the percussion revolver spouted fire. Abel had aimed for Radu's shoulder, but the vampire avoided the blow by twisting his body just before the bullet struck. Luckily, the near miss saved Ion; Radu's claws sliced the deck, cutting off only two or three of Ion's hairs.

The boy threw his body down as if to roll.

The Efreet clucked his tongue as he extracted his claws from the deck. He wearily shook his wrist. "Don't interfere with me, Terran!" Radu challenged, throwing a fireball behind him without bothering to look back.

The fireball hurtled toward Abel's face. The priest instantly bent backward to evade the fire, but the action caused his feet to slide toward the sea.

"Father!" Esther shouted.

Abel, who was grasping the handrail with one arm, had narrowly escaped falling.

Meanwhile, Radu continued his pursuit of Ion, who was crawling on the deck, trying to escape.

A blue-white flame floated in Radu's hand.

The priest had no time to help the boy – all he could do was hold on to the handrail.

"Father, what are you doing? Sheesh!" Esther cried out, exasperated. Her left hand still grasping the helm, Esther pointed her shotgun muzzle at the ship's stern. She didn't know if she could hit anything from this distance, but if she didn't shoot now, the boy surely would die. "God, give me strength!"

That instant, a miracle occurred. The hand of God came down.

The yacht's mainsail, which had been rolled up on a mast, suddenly crashed down. Abel's bullets, which Radu had deflected a little while before, apparently had cut the ropes. The sail completely enveloped the Efreet.

A small, pained cry arose.

The sailcloth caught on fire, thanks to the fireball Radu had been preparing to throw at Ion. Although he was an Efreet, his body had no resistance against fire – other than the skin on his calloused palms. Radu flailed wildly, trying to escape from the burning sailcloth that wound around him.

"Thank you, God!" Esther declared.

Suddenly, a shotgun spat fire, its round of silver aimed at the Efreet's face.

A human's head would have exploded under the force of such a powerful shot. However, the vampire's reaction speed was the fastest reflex in the world. Before the bullet struck, Radu made his body level. He avoided the shot – but remained on fire.

"Ugh!" Radu screamed. He lost his balance and fell into the sea. "Io –"

In the whitely bubbling ship's wake, a red flower bloomed brightly.

The Criminal's Mark

*I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.
He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light.*

–Lamentations 3:1 - 3:2

I

Although the sun had not set yet, people were disappearing from the city streets. Even in the marketplace, which normally would remain boisterously busy until deep into the night, shoppers hurried home with their bags. "Closed" signs swung on the doors of bars and casinos that ought to have been opening now. Instead of patrons, a group of soldiers outfitted with black field uniforms and submachine guns walked briskly through Medina. It was eight fifty in the evening. Ten minutes remained until the nighttime curfew that had been announced three days ago went into effect. The streets of Carthage rapidly were becoming bare.

"This is surprising. Isn't it just like martial law?" Abel asked.

Perhaps it was worse. If it had been martial law, at least Carthage's own army would be in control – but that was not the military now prowling the city.

Abel gazed up at a bronze statue that stood before the Grand Cathedral, a lady knight who was beautiful even clad in armor. The Saint Elissa statue's pedestal was swarmed with soldiers in black field uniforms, the badge on their collars based on the Vineam Domini, the emblem of the Carabinieri, the Vatican's most infamous anti-terrorism corps.

"I'm stumped. We can't very well get to the embassy like this. Weak, weak," Abel muttered.

Disguised as one of the passersby, Abel kept his gaze downcast as he walked in front of the special police – who had the safeties off their pistols so they could fire at any time. The tall Bedouin clucked his tongue and shook his head beneath his turban. In one hand, he held a paper bag, in the other a rope leash, which was leading a camel. He hoped to appear as if he had come to market from a desert village and therefore hadn't heard about the curfew. However, if the special police looked carefully, they might perceive that his eyes weren't black like those of a Carthaginian, but blue like a winter lake – and the gait of the man carrying the paper bag was strangely uncomfortable, as if he were wounded. Thankfully, a group of civilians staring at the Carabinieri from across the street had the soldiers' attention. With the hostile locals at hand, the special police didn't notice the dangerous person walking down the street.

"Well, it can't be helped – I'll have to give up on contacting Caterina today," Abel sighed. *They make overwhelmingly powerful enemies, so there's no use sweating it. Besides, my body is . . .* Abel slowly passed before the Carabinieri. The gunshot wound in his shoulder was pitiful; yet, pink flesh already was encroaching upon the wound. As long as he didn't overexert himself, he would be healed in about a week. His recuperative powers were unthinkable for a human with common sense.

"Okay, don't move your right shoulder until it's healed properly. I don't think you'll lose any more blood, but the muscle might tear again," Esther explained in a soft voice.

Ion pushed himself halfway up in bed.

Treatment of external wounds was one of Esther's specialties from when she'd been a Partisan. There was no hesitation as she removed the bandage and smeared on disinfectant.

"You were lucky. If the shot had gone a little farther astray, it would've hit your heart."

"Lucky? Radu said the same thing," Ion said pensively from his position on the bed, which had been placed in a corner of the bedroom to prevent it from being struck by sunlight. The boy gave a tired sigh. Notwithstanding that he was lying in a thin, filthy bed in a cheap inn, he was annoyed.

With his translucent white skin and androgynous good looks, he resembled a princess in a fairytale. Without knowing his circumstances, it would be difficult for an outsider to tell that he was a boy, let alone a vampire.

Ion twisted the sheets in his fingers and sighed deeply once more. "But if I'd died then, maybe I wouldn't have seen my friends' treachery, I would've died without knowing Radu had betrayed me."

"What nonsense you're talking! First of all..." Esther tried to find some encouraging words, but in the end, she merely opened and closed her mouth. Better than anyone, Esther understood the way Ion's heart now clutched in agony, having been betrayed by a trusted friend. She herself had experienced enough of that in a freezing subterranean tunnel only a few months before, and she'd hated it. She knew any consolatory words she offered would sound hollow, so she, too, gave a small sigh.

"Radu was my foster brother," Ion lamented, not bothering to look at the nun, who'd fallen silent. "We were together since the day I was born. He was my only friend."

A friend since childhood? They looked so different in age ... Oh, I see. While listening to the boy's recollections, Esther remembered the training grounds' lecture concerning Methuselah

biology: They weren't born immortal. Newborn Methuselah aged very normally, their life force no different than a human's, and they couldn't be harmed by the sun or silver. They became vampires at the end of a process they called "awakening." They awakened at different times, because every individual was different. The timing of their awakening was said to determine the age they appeared to be outwardly. Ion probably had matured sooner than his friend.

"I'm so stupid!" Ion shouted.

"Your Excellency!" Esther hurriedly grasped Ion's hands.

Something red dripped between his firmly curled fists, but the wounded Methuselah continued to beat the sheets with his red hands as if he didn't even notice Esther. "I would've died for him! If he'd asked me to, I would've given my own life!"

"Your Excellency . . ." Gazing down at Ion's trembling shoulders, Esther bit her lip, recalling how she had blamed herself for being betrayed. / *wish I weren't so inexperienced. At a time like this, what kind of words does a person need to hear?*

Everyone had their own burdens to bear, she knew. Esther wasn't arrogant enough to think she could comfort another person's distress. Still, she wanted to find words that would help ease his pain. She recalled the sentiment that had made her happiest when she'd felt down. "Your Excellency," Esther began. Then, still grasping the boy's hands, Esther said those words: "I'm your friend!"

"What?" Ion abruptly looked up, his brow knitted as if he'd forgotten his previous distress.

"What are you saying?"

Have I blundered? Her face on fire, Esther bit her lip. "Th-that is . . ." Dropping the boy's hands, the nun explained, "No matter how much Your Excellency is persecuted, even if Your Excellency is surrounded by enemies, I'll be Your Excellency's friend. Um, that's what I meant to say."

Shaking his head, Ion spoke casually. "I don't understand what you're saying at all."

"Sorry," Esther whispered.

"But ... thank you."

"Hmm?" Esther glanced up. It was the first time she'd seen him smile.

"Esther, you're strange—er, what I mean to say is, you're . . . interesting ... for a Terran." Ion softly closed his eyes and gently entangled his warm fingers with those of the nun. "I thank you."

"Y-you're welcome!" Esther shook her head, aware that her face was turning bright red.

She suddenly noticed that night had fallen. The two of them were alone in a curtained room, sitting together on a bed. When she thought about it, it seemed a dangerous situation.

"Shall I open the curtains?" Esther stood up. This way, she could both take her hands away and make their room seem a little less secluded. "Didn't Your Excellency say you liked the night view from here?"

"Yes." Ion nodded sharply, reluctantly disentangling his fingers. This room was on the third floor of a three-story inn, which was a comparatively high building for Carthage. Ion liked that he could see a panorama of the city from the window. "The view from here reminds me a bit of the Empire—of course, this city clearly doesn't approach the elegance of home."

A night breeze blew in, carrying the scent of the sea from the window. The vampire looked out, toying with his blond hair, which shone with a faint luster under the feeble lamps. The sparkle in his eyes was beautiful, though his expression was sad and empty.

"Will I ever set eyes on home again?" he murmured.

"Of course!" Esther, who'd been putting away bandages, hurriedly looked up at the sound of his gloomy voice. As if to cheer up her companion and herself, she deliberately smiled brightly. Esther had never had a brother, but she wondered if having one would've felt like this. "Of course you will. Absolutely. Father Nightroad and I will protect Your Excellency! Until Your Excellency meets with Cardinal Sforza and returns home safely, we'll defend you, even at the cost of our lives!"

However, Esther's real feelings weren't as simple as her cheerful smile indicated. The city had been under the Department of Inquisition's control for three days, so they couldn't move about. Far from getting Ion to the embassy, it would be difficult to escape from this inn even. Besides, there was no guarantee that they could remain here unharmed for very long.

They both just wanted someone to confidently assure them.

"Yes, it's as you say," Ion assented, as if he were inspired by the nun's smile. Of course he knew how dangerous his situation was. Yet he made himself smile out of gratitude toward Esther, for trying to encourage him. "Surely, everything will go well in the end. I'll carry out Her Majesty's Imperial order, safely return to the Empire, and get my fill of its beautiful night scenery. You believe it, don't you, Esther?"

"Of course, that's my job."

"Trustworthy, aren't you?" Ion remarked.

The duo recognized the embarrassed smiles on each other's faces.

Suddenly, a soft knock interrupted.

"Urn, excuse me, it's Nightroad. I've just returned," Abel murmured on the other side of the door.

"Ah, Father, you're late." Ion sighed as if relieved.

The priest entered the room, coughing lightly. Not noticing that Esther's face became somewhat stiffer as he entered, Abel thanked them for waiting and sat down, taking off his turban.

"Thanks for scouting," Ion replied. "You returned late, so I was a little worried. Did anything happen along the way?"

"Well, the whole place is packed with special police, so it was hard to walk through the streets. Ah, Esther, any change while I was gone?"

"Not really," Esther replied without even looking at him.

Ion looked puzzled at her cold expression, a complete contrast from her demeanor just seconds before. "What's wrong, Esther?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, it's nothing." She mended the smile on her face, but her expression couldn't quite suppress a certain stiffness.

Abel stole a glance at her profile and seemed a little sad, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he coughed again and spoke to Ion with a surprising cheerfulness: "Well, Your Excellency, how is your wound? Can you move a little?"

"Yes, it's doing pretty well. Almost all the silver has been drawn out, so I think it will heal completely within a week. When it does, I could even sneak into the embassy myself." Ion nodded, firmly resolved. His voice was bright, perhaps because Esther's previous encouragement had worked.

But the priest's face clouded by contrast. "A week? Really? It will still take that long?"

"That long?" repeated Ion. "Is there some problem, Father?"

"Yes, the truth is—excuse me," Abel said, putting a handkerchief to his mouth and coughing again. He'd been coughing from time to time for the past few days.

"Are you okay, Father? You don't look well," Ion worried.

"Oh, I'm okay—looks like I caught a bit of a cold." The priest shook his head, the handkerchief balled in his hand. His color wasn't good, but his voice was already returning to normal. "I'm sorry. So, to continue our conversation, the movements of the Department of Inquisition are more vigorous than I predicted. We might not be able to hold out against them for two or three days."

"They brought that much firepower with them?"

The priest nodded, his face slightly pale.

Esther frowned.

Over the past three days, the Department of Inquisition had been doing whatever it wanted in the city of Carthage. Using the fact that the Vatican embassy had been attacked by a vampire as an excuse, they had been strutting about arrogantly, probably intending to show the superiority of the church to the common lords. It was as if there was no sovereign city government. Whoever showed the least sign of resistance—whether a citizen who had nothing to do with the incident at the embassy, or a member of the current public authorities—was jailed without mercy.

"So, my meeting with Cardinal Sforza —"

"It's very severely guarded." Abel shrugged and wiped his mouth with the handkerchief.

"The embassy is completely sealed. Of course, it's being 'defended,' so Caterina—er, Cardinal Sforza probably has been placed under informal custody. Maybe we should give up on a meeting."

The boy pouted.

Abel shook his head. "I know how you feel. But, you have to acknowledge the terrible risk. It's getting very difficult to escape from this city even."

"I'm a Boyar," Ion said simply, resolved. "And to a noble, Her Majesty's Imperial orders are absolute. I'd choose to end my life before disobeying an order."

"I understand your feelings. But you won't be the only one exposed to danger if you force a meeting. If the Department of Inquisition were to raid during your exchange, Cardinal Sforza would suffer the most. Please, put the idea aside, at least for now."

Esther stood up rather suddenly. She couldn't watch Ion's discouraged expression any longer. "Shall I make tea? This might be a long discussion, and it would be much better over tea. Father, won't you lend me a hand?"

"No, I ..." Abel tried to shake his head, but he froze at Esther's piercing glare. He stood up reluctantly and turned toward the kitchen, leaving Ion alone in the room.

"What is it, Esther?" Abel asked.

"Were you talking seriously just now?" Esther whispered, her face grim. Her voice was low, so as not to let the boy in the bedroom hear, but her eyes were sharp. "Do you intend to make that boy go home empty-handed, without even seeing Her Eminence?"

"Well, yes." Sensing the heat in the girl's tone, Abel averted his eyes. He pushed up his glasses as he explained, "Actually, the situation is very dire. Moreover, there's a strong possibility that it will worsen, whereas the possibility that it will change in our favor is practically zero. If it's going to be like this, he needs to leave this city —"

"But weren't Cardinal Sforza's orders to protect him and take him to her?"

"The situation was completely different then. The Department of Inquisition hadn't arrived, and Baron Luxor hadn't turned traitor. The cardinal didn't expect Count Memphis to be wounded, unable to move. It would be better if I could use this radio, at least," Abel made a sad face while holding up his communications link. The earpiece had broken when he'd been hit by the Chief Inquisitor. "At any rate, there's nothing we can do. Caterina must understand that, too."

"I'm not talking about 'Caterina,'" Esther spat out in a harsh tone. "I'm talking about Count Memphis. That boy risked his life to come to this city, and you would send him back empty-handed?"

The Department of Inquisition was a strong enemy, especially Brother Petro—the Chief Inquisitor was certainly a threat. But they still had an ace up their sleeve: If the priest used his Crusnik abilities, the Department of Inquisition would be no match for him. If he'd used his powers in the underground harbor, Ion might not have been in such great danger. If Abel had stopped Radu there and wounded Brother Petro, they might not have been driven into hiding!

"It can't be helped, Esther," Abel said, shrugging. "We've tried everything. There's no use regretting what we can't do."

"We've tried 'everything'?"

The priest's objections made their situation sound like someone else's problem, and that rubbed Esther the wrong way.

Something inside her snapped. "Father, do you really think so? Can you really puff up and say we've tried everything?"

Yes, her dissatisfaction had been smoldering just under the surface ever since Istavan. Before she knew it, Esther had gripped the priest's coat lapels, shouting: "You haven't tried everything! You've been incredibly stingy with your full strength!"

"Esther, I'm not shirking my responsibilities."

"Liar! Why won't you use the powers I saw you use in Istavan?" Esther shook Abel. If she'd kept her cool, she might have noticed that the priest's face was draining of color. However, several months' resentment was exploding out of her in a heated string of words. "If you'd taken things seriously, we'd been fine—and the boy wouldn't have been endangered the way he has been!"

Abel didn't try to explain further. Looking gloomy, he simply endured in silence.

That made Esther even more furious. Glaring, she hurled her words at Abel like a weapon, trying to gouge out his heart. "You son of —

"Um, Esther?" Ion asked in a timid voice

"Wh-what's the matter, Your Excellency?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but . . ." Ion seemed perplexed as he looked back and forth between the displeased girl and the bleary-eyed priest. Still, he coughed and pointed to the window.

"There's a group of people outside, and they're acting somewhat strange."

Esther and Abel looked at each other, forgetting their argument. They peered out the window, crying out simultaneously, "Special police!"

Thirty men in black field uniforms stood in front of the inn. The inn's owner stood next to the police, pointing up at the window of their room.

"Your Excellency, get dressed!" Esther ordered Ion sharply. She handed the boy his clothing and started nimbly packing drugs, food, and weapons into a bag. She threw a quick, guilty glance at Abel as he went into the hallway to search for signs from below.

Now that she was calm, regret crossed a corner of Esther's mind. She shouldn't have said such terrible things to Abel. But she quickly shook off such faintheartedness. *I'm not in the wrong. It's his fault.*

Because they'd planned ahead, they were ready to escape in less than a minute — but even that short period of time had been enough for abrupt noises to come up through the floorboards, indicating the soldiers were already downstairs.

Esther went out into the corridor, pulling Ion by the hand. Abel took the lead, entering an empty room thanks to a skeleton key he'd had made in advance. In preparation for this kind of situation, they'd planned their escape down to the very last detail. The two agents

and envoy had to outwit the police and find a safe house before dawn. It would be dangerous to exit the back door; the fact that the police had been this noisy coming in surely meant that they already had it covered. But the neighboring roof connected to the inn right below this room's window. They could see glimpses of special police uniforms in the alley. If they kept strictly to the rooftops, they might not be seen.

"Hurry, you two!" Abel pressed.

"Yes, I'm coming," Esther responded.

They could already hear the pounding of military shoes running up the steps.

Abel opened the window. As Esther crept through, she locked gazes with the priest; suddenly, she wanted to apologize.

"Hurry, Esther! They're almost there," said Abel.

"I know!" Rushed, she wasn't able to say anything after all.

II

With vacant eyes, the Methuselah watched the blood-fortifying medication melt and bubble in his drink. The white powder in the small copper bottle remained untouched. "Too much opium in the stuff I make," the vampire muttered to himself.

Still slouching in a chair, he extended his hand to the small bottle. It had been three days since he'd had a hot bath. His bloodstained undershirt was filthy, and his night-colored hair was so tangled that a comb couldn't pass through it.

But he had no need to concern himself. This place had been untouched by sunlight since history began. There were no eyes to take in his outward appearance.

It was silent here, except for the faint whisper of the fuel cell that provided the Queen's Grave with semi-permanent electric power and the hum of the computer that probably would work until the end of time.

"*You* have bad taste, adding sugar to AquaVitae, of all things." He tilted the copper bottle over his glass. The high-purity opium was rapidly saturated by the life water. The undissolved part sank to the bottom.

After drinking down the last drop, he coughed, vomiting it all back up.

"It's true," Radu conceded, chuckling even as tears came to his eyes. He smiled as if making fun of somebody. "Certainly, this has too much opium in it. You were right, my friend."

The overdose of opium was only enough to make him slightly intoxicated — although it would have been a fatal dose for a Terran. Once again, he poured mineral water and blood-building medicine into his glass. He was about to pour in opium again, when a sarcastic voice said: "Oh, dear. Aren't you in a fine state — and at a time like this? Isn't it a little too early for drinking?"

"Who is it?"

Radu was more than six hundred feet beneath Carthage — there shouldn't have been anyone there but him. Not only was this place lower than any nuclear shelter, who could possibly approach without his Methuselah super senses noticing?

"Don't 'who is it?' me, Flanberg. What in the world is the Flame Sword doing here?"

"Oh, it's you, Puppeteer." Radu let out a sigh of relief. He swallowed thickly as he watched the shadow step forward.

The young man borne from the darkness was beautiful. He had long brown hair and deep brown eyes. His good looks gave off both an air of delicacy and danger. He was wearing a

simple jacket, but it fit him so well that it looked better than the ceremonial attire of any nobility.

Radu was also thought to be beautiful, but he didn't amount to much compared with this man. If angels really existed, God might have given them a form like Puppeteer's.

Whenever Radu met with the young man, he always remembered a verse from the Terran Bible: "*And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.*"

"What did you come all this way for, Puppeteer?"

"I came to see how you were, Flanberg. Well, to be more accurate, to check on you and the Iblis." Puppeteer shrugged his shoulders, sporting a puzzled expression. Even frowning, he was still beautiful enough to make Radu sigh. "The Empire's envoy and the Vatican's cardinal entered Carthage long ago. We took steps to see both assassinated. Moreover, we provided you with the sealed ancient ruins as a backup measure, in case the assassination failed. We even deliberately hunted the Vatican programmer for you. But nothing happened, so I got worried and came to find the operative responsible—and I find you, getting drunk and grumbling. What should I report when I return?" The youth contemptuously snapped his fingers at the vampire, but Radu maintained his disgruntled silence.

On the ceiling, a white light turned on. It was small enough to seem pitiful in such gaping darkness, but it was bright enough to illuminate a huge altar.

They were holed up in a four-cornered pyramid, fashioned to resemble an ancient ziggurat. Superstitious Carthaginians had sealed the dead queen's tombstone here many generations before. The two men here knew that the burial grounds comprised a computer, structured on a framework of lost technology. Saint Elissa had built it in preparation for a certain day—and even now, hundreds of years after its builder's death, it continued to run, determined to accomplish its purpose.

"Well, it can't be helped that you failed to assassinate the conspirators, but why didn't you start up the Iblis right after? You could have settled things right away if you'd used this. It would have completely buried Count Memphis and Cardinal Sforza," Puppeteer conjectured.

"If I'd used Iblis, their deaths would be regarded as accidents," Radu answered sullenly before gulping the opium-laced Aqua Vitae. "The envoy and cardinal must be killed by a Terran and a Methuselah respectively—if not, our Orden won't achieve its objective to induce war between the Empire and the Vatican."

"True, but it would be terrible if the envoy and cardinal actually were to meet, which is why the Orden decided to obliterate them both with the Iblis if our assassination attempts failed. Why did you ignore the backup plan?"

"I haven't failed yet," Radu scoffed.

Puppeteer groaned in disbelief, his handsome face as white as porcelain.

"I haven't failed yet. The Terran Department of Inquisition is searching for Io—the Empress's envoy, who escaped into the city. As soon as they've found the envoy, I'll finish him off during the ensuing confusion. And I'll kill the cardinal, too."

"Do you think it will go so easily?"

"What are you trying to say, Puppeteer?" The Methuselah glared at the young man. "If you have something to say, how about saying it clearly?"

"I worry whether you can kill the envoy," Puppeteer said. He was frowning, yet his eyes sparkled with a pleasant light as he gazed down at Radu. "When the Empress first sent an envoy to Cardinal Sforza, it was you who contacted our Orden to prevent the meeting, wasn't it, Flame Sword?"

"Yes. We can't hold negotiations with the Terran. I had to obstruct the dispatch of the envoy somehow," Radu explained with a heated glare. If he felt like it, Radu probably could have turned one or two Terran into cinders in less time than it took them to blink. However, the handsome man didn't so much as twitch before Radu's anger, and this made Radu grit his teeth. "I didn't want to merely obstruct their meeting; I wanted to take advantage of it to incite a confrontation between the two sides. I wasn't worried, nor was the Orden—until the Empress chose Ion as envoy ... Count Memphis ... my friend."

The Puppeteer shook his head, his eyes brimming with deep sympathy. "Fate acts cruelly at times. You had to turn your weapon on the friend who trusted you most, of all people. So, you—"

"My individual feelings have nothing to do with it now." Radu's eyes flashed a warning that Puppeteer had better stop his farce of sympathy. He spat out his next words: "Stop distrusting me. Yes, our future depends on this plan. I know that! I'm not a sap who's going to be dissuaded by puny individual feelings!"

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," Puppeteer mocked. "Stop brandishing your cheaply bought sense of righteousness, Flanberg. You just hesitated to kill your friend. You couldn't disturb a hair on Count Memphis. First, you couldn't get the Vatican to kill your friend—and then, you couldn't start up the Iblis! Oh dear, you're very cowardly!"

"You go too far, Puppeteer." Enraged, the nobleman's face had turned white as paper. His palm burst into blue light. "Do you intend to ridicule me as if I were a mere Terran?"

"Will you ignore my advice, like a mere vampire?" Puppeteer taunted.

A fireball about the size of a clenched fist broke into countless pieces and attacked the Puppeteer. But the young man simply shrugged again, heaving a sad sigh. "You really have no concept of loyalty."

Suddenly, it grew dark. Shadows surrounded the young man, blocking him like a wall. The darkness transformed into men, clad in black cloaks that hung down to their ankles. Helmets and gas masks covered their facial features.

How had they been hiding from the vampire Radu's hypersensitive eyesight? He was shocked when their heavy machine guns spewed fire.

"Wh-what are these things?" Radu mumbled, aghast as all his fireballs were knocked down, one by one.

"Aren't they jolly? Auto Hunters are the latest development in killing dolls," Puppeteer mused.

"The mechanical soldiers that the Terran make?" the vampire asked, blinking rapidly.

"Close, but a little different." Puppeteer laughed, taking a gas mask and helmet off the soldier beside him.

The vampire went pale and moaned.

An ordinary man's face appeared underneath the gas mask—but his eyes were sewn together, and a gag was stuffed in his mouth. Mechanical parts were buried in the top of his bald head. However, that wasn't what had made Radu blanch.

"Yes. They're vampires, the same as you. Oops, sorry—I meant to say they were *once* Methuselah." Puppeteer laughed, his finger creeping along a fang peeking out of the gag in the soldier's mouth. "We removed the frontal lobes of their brains and inserted electronic intelligence instead. Drugs and brainwashing don't work on your kind, but lobotomies . . . Their intelligence and will were nullified thanks to that; in exchange, they don't feel pain or fatigue. They are the strongest, most faithful battle machines."

"Damn you!" The Efreet's eyes glowed red at the sight of his pathetic brethren. "I won't forgive you, Puppeteer!"

"You won't? Well, I respectfully agree that you're a very proud noble, so I didn't expect you to." The young man's hand suddenly extended.

Radu's body stiffened as if he'd been bound hand and foot.

The young man whispered mischievously in the immobilized Methuselah's ear. "My rank as Puppeteer in the Orden is eight-three—much higher than your rank of six-five, Flame Sword. Taking that into consideration, is barking such nonsense any way to address your superior?"

With Radu's strength, he should be able to tear a Terran like this limb from limb with one finger. But the rigid Methuselah could only pant in fear, sweating. Severe pain ran like lava through his whole body's nerves. He couldn't lift a finger. "I-I'm sorry." He gasped. "Forgive my rudeness."

"Ah, no need to be so suddenly formal. All humans—oops, excuse me—vampires make mistakes. A generous spirit forgives that; forgiveness is the fabric of society," Puppeteer snickered, snapping his fingers softly.

Radu's body fell like a marionette whose strings had been cut. He writhed on the floor before getting up on his hands and knees, panting.

The Puppeteer peered down at the Methuselah as if he were a favored dog. "No, I said too much. It's not like I don't understand why you don't want to kill your friend, but ... the Orden is full of people who doubt you. Don't you need to show your loyalty to them here and now?"

He looked like a concerned young man encouraging a good friend. However, a sadistic light shined in Puppeteer's eyes. "I'll give you one more chance to kill Count Memphis. Try your best to challenge him to a battle. If you fail to kill your friend this time, then I can't help you: I will start up the Iblis and erase all Carthage. How does that strike you?"

"I understand." Radu looked down at his own blood dripping on the floor. "Understood."

"Yes, well done." Nodding in satisfaction, the young man thrust his hand in a bag. He dug out a pocket watch and gently lifted the cover. As if chanting, he whispered, "You should go at once. Ah, just a moment, I'll give this to you." The Puppeteer smiled. "What do you suppose this is?"

Radu looked at the shiny gold disk Puppeteer had handed him. His expression hardened at once when he saw the warning written there in Imperial language.

Puppeteer laughed once more. "A small parting gift, proof of my pact with you. How should I put it? Like the boy, I also will die at your hand."

Radu swallowed.

"Can you read it? 'And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.'" The young man backed up, smiling like an angel. "I know you think you've been cheated, but take it and go. It will definitely come in handy. Well, do your best. I'm rooting for you, Baron."

His beautiful form disappeared as if he'd melted into darkness, the evil Auto Hunters disappearing with him.

Silent, the Methuselah sank powerlessly to the floor, weighed down by invisible chains that he'd worn for years. The Methuselah glared at the golden disk left in his hand. Suddenly, a small laugh escaped him.

His lips, which had been pressed together tightly until now, trembled slightly. Radu chuckled softly. He realized he'd made a bargain with the devil. He laughed the laugh of a man who, in order to obtain fool's gold, had exchanged something far more precious.

Radu stood up, his eyes haunted. His mouth warped into a twisted smile. The laughter that came from deep inside him sounded like it came from a wounded creature.

"Why hesitate now, when it's already too late?" Radu asked. "I'm a filthy traitor."

III

My sincere apologies for showing up at such a time." Il Ruinante bowed ceremoniously to the lady, who was wearing a thin gown over her nightclothes. With his helmet off, his face looked unexpectedly young, refined, even handsome.

From his outward appearance, he could've been a dignitary from a distinguished family or an up-and-coming elite bureaucrat. It was hard to believe that this young man, the very picture of seriousness, was Carthage's Public Enemy Number One, hated as much as a venomous viper.

"I'm ashamed to disturb your sleep."

"Enough with the excessive greetings. May I ask your business, Brother Petro?" Caterina Sforza defiantly jutted out her chin and placed her hands on her crossed legs. Not offering her uninvited guest a seat was her subtle way of declaring her displeasure. "It's past eleven o'clock, a bit too late to be visiting with anyone but a vampire. Could it be that you've come to apologize for confining a cardinal such as myself to the embassy for three days?"

"Well now, confined? Apologize? I'm sorry, but I have absolutely no such intention," Petro replied, as courteous as ever, but absolutely unyielding. "We've placed personnel around the embassy for defensive purposes, a natural precaution. If Your Eminence were to venture outside, you'd be giving the vampire in hiding another chance to attack. Certainly, it's inconvenient, but it's hardly 'confinement.'"

"I will have a long talk with Cardinal Medici when I've returned to Rome. I won't be able to help mentioning underlings like you in that discussion." Speaking as if her words were a chisel of ice she was thrusting into his chest, Caterina uncrossed her legs. Her eyes flashing coldly, she asked politely: "If you haven't come to apologize, then what business could you have tonight?"

"Yes, the truth is, I came up to report that we found your vampire — I mean to say, the monster that attacked Your Eminence the other day."

For an instant, Caterina's thin fingers, which were clasped in her lap, turned white as paper. "I see. Thank you for your hard work. So, did you kill the terrorist or simply arrest him?"

"Well, we still haven't captured him. Unfortunately, when we raided the inn where he was hiding, he escaped." The Chief Inquisitor shook his head with exaggerated seriousness, his slanted eyes raking over the cardinal's beautiful face.

Caterina had to suppress a sigh of relief by exerting the limits of her self-control. "That's another wonderful error: the Chief Inquisitor allowing a vampire to escape. Contrary to my expectations, is the Department of Inquisition full of incompetents?"

"I'm quite mortified by your reprimand — but I should explain that the monster has someone unexpected cooperating with him. The Carabinieri who raided were taken by surprise when they encountered his accomplice."

"A collaborator?" The cardinal looked at her visitor curiously; she would have made an excellent stage actress. She repeated her question with natural ease: "Is it another vampire?"

"No. Humans guided the vampire to escape — a teenage girl and a young man in his twenties." Brother Petro still wore his game face, giving no indication that he noticed Caterina's performance. He simply reported the facts with an almost obscene degree of calm.

Caterina sighed.

"Additionally – this is unconfirmed intelligence, but I've received a report that the humans were dressed as a priest and a nun. Do you have any idea who they might be, Your Eminence?" Petro's eyes pierced Caterina's face.

"You expect that I would?" Caterina shook her head, high-class insolence filling every inch of her expression. "How should I know anything about the kind of outrageous people who would cooperate with a vampire? Why ask such a stupid thing? Speaking with you is very unpleasant."

"If I hurt your feelings, I apologize profoundly. Being a military man, I'm not acquainted with the more eloquent manners of speech." Petro bowed his head respectfully to the beauty.

Caterina's eyebrows rose. There was no chink in his armor. He was a military man – the type Caterina was worst at dealing with. "Well, fine." Resisting the urge to cluck her tongue, Caterina continued, "Although you military people are perfectly polite, I can't expect you to be familiar enough with the nuances of subtle language to understand how insulting you just came off. So, what about that vampire you failed to catch? Is he still hiding somewhere?"

"No, my subordinates are pursuing him even now. I'll be joining them personally, so we should settle this matter tonight. We've caused Your Eminence such inconvenience, so I wanted to tell you that you should be able to relax a little come tomorrow."

"Oh, this conversation just became so much more pleasant. By all means, please, take care of the monster." With a sigh, Caterina mumbled under her breath, "I don't care if you never come back."

The cardinal gave a perfectly charming smile, made the sign of the cross, and stood. "I'll pray for your success, Brother Petro. *Dominus vobiscum*," Caterina stated.

"As you will!" The Chief Inquisitor bowed deeply. As soon as he left the reception office, a loud bang sounded just outside.

"Oh, they even brought their armored vehicles. Really, this group does so love such grandiose things," Caterina smirked.

The taillights of a six-wheeled military vehicle departed, its engine rumbling like thunder. Caterina watched them go, a cold expression settling on her face. Suddenly, her earring chirped. "*Lady Caterina, what shall we do?*" Kate asked. "*If the Empire's envoy is caught by the Department of Inquisition ...*"

"Calm down, Sister Kate. The envoy hasn't been caught yet." In a quiet but severe tone, Caterina scolded her subordinate, who sounded quite flustered on the other end of the radio. "Hearing that Abel and the novice sister are still in the envoy's company is a relief. Would you please deduce their location from your position in the sky? We'll have to rescue them before the Department of Inquisition catches them."

"Negative." A voice as hard as steel struck the cardinal.

Caterina turned to see a young priest standing in a corner of the reception office; he'd entered without making a single noise.

"What did you say, Father Tres?" Caterina queried.

"Negative," repeated Father Tres Iqus, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. "Under current circumstances, the probability of a successful rescue operation is zero percent. You had best give up on those three, Duchess of Milan."

"Father Tres, what a thing for you to say!" Sister Kate raised her voice. "You think we should give up? Are you telling us to abandon Abel and the others?"

"Affirmative. This is a Department of Inquisition trap. Cardinal Medici's ultimate aim is to overthrow the Duchess of Milan's authority by casting suspicion that she's been communicating with the Empire," Tres elaborated. Gazing at his mistress—who

maintained her silence—her faithful hunting dog added, "The inquisitors probably already know that the fleeing Imperial envoys accomplices are from the Department of Foreign Affairs. However, if they captured only the agents, the Duchess of Milan could deny any knowledge of their actions. The Department of Inquisition would much prefer to wait for us to try to rescue our allies," Tres said, 'which explains why they informed you of the pursuit.'

"Indeed. Then, Brother Petro came deliberately," Kate concluded. It was obvious he intended to make Caterina nervous regarding her subordinates, causing her to misstep.

"Sister Kate," Caterina called the nun to attention.

"Yes, Lady Caterina?" he nun sounded down, perhaps saddened by the idea that he superior would have to abandon Kate's comrades. "What is it?"

"What are you waiting fir? Your original orders stand."

"Huh?" Kate's voice waned. "What are you saying?"

"I'm ordering you to rescue that trio on the run within the city. Hurry."

Her loyal subordinate repeated his warning: "Duchess of Milan, I suggest that you change your orders. The rescue operation is too risky."

"Father Tres, no matte- how great the risk," Caterina's voice was as beautiful as muse but as hard as iron, "I won't let the Department of Inquisition kill the Imperial envoy. It could lead to a final battle between the Empire and the Vatican—no, between vampires and humanity. Therefore, even if I were to be subjected to torture, I would still attempt to save the envoy. Hurry, Sister Kate."

"Understood. Then, I request permission to sortie, Duchess of Milan. I will participate n the rescue operation, too," Tres concluded.

"You? But Father Tres, your eyes ..." Caterina choked up at her subordinate's request. Tres' optical sensors had been totally lost in the battle with the Efrete. Thanks to his other sensors, his daily operation experienced no hindrance, but he wasn't in a condition to enter battle. "You can't fight now. On the contrary, won't you be a hindrance?"

"Negative. I drew up a tactical plan in case a rescue operation was forced," Tres stated in his usual monotone. His expression was completely unreadable thanks to his shades. He touched his earpiece and spoke to Sister Kate: "I request your cooperation, too, Iron Maiden. Meet me before the battle; there's something I'll need to borrow from you."

IV

"May I ask you one thing, Esther?" After some consideration, Ion seemed to have made up his mind to ask a sensitive question. In the passenger seat, Ion strained his voice to be heard over the roar of the wind. "By all means, I want to confirm something with you!"

"Something important, I suppose, Your Excellency?" Esther asked, gripping the wheel of the military vehicle called Merkaba as the scenery outside flew by.

"Yes! Maybe something very important!" Ion declared.

"Yes, but please be brief!" the nun shouted back, not bothering to look at his face. She cut the wheel left, then right, her feet tapping between the accelerator and the clutch.

She looked very busy, so Ion hesitated to open his mouth for an instant; then, he worked up the nerve: "Where in the world are we going?"

"Ask the people behind us!"

A fierce Klaxon bellowed directly behind them. A six-wheeled heavy armored vehicle—about as big as a large truck—was practically leaning over the Merkaba.

"Attention, driver: Stop your vehicle!" The Vineam Domini emblem on the front of the armored vehicle's body was clearly visible. *"This is the Vatican special police! You are under arrest for theft of a military vehicle, as well as for disobeying the nighttime curfew! Pull over, and stop on the shoulder!"*

"How rude, treating people like criminals . . . Moreover, auto theft and curfew breaking? Isn't that too trivial for the Inquisition?" Esther clucked her tongue and glared at the armored vehicle in her rearview mirror. Pilfering this Merkaba right after they'd escaped the inn had put them off to a good start — however, after that, it had gone badly. They couldn't even ditch the vehicle and hide now.

"Stop! Stop or we'll shoot!"

"Esther, what are they saying?" Ion whispered as if he were trying to calm her. He remained strangely subdued despite the nun's nervous gripping of the wheel.

Abel didn't say one word; he'd been sitting in the backseat pouting for a while now.

Now that she'd thought about it, the training ground's driving course instructor had worn much the same expression as the priest. After she'd completed her driving class, her ghastly pale instructor had said, "Sister Esther, let me offer you some advice: You had better drive only when it's absolutely necessary. Yes, unless it's an urgent necessity, leave the driving to somebody else."

What had he meant by that?

Ion cleared his throat. "Ah, Esther . . . Hadn't we better answer the people behind us?"

"Oh no, everything's fine! Just ignore them!" Esther shouted back, hurriedly changing the clutch. They had gone considerably far north, toward the sea. This area of Carthage housed a harbor warehouse district without any residential buildings. No citizens would happen to pass by, so there was nothing to prevent the soldiers from firing their cannons.

A thin voice could be heard from the backseat: "Esther, please pay attention to the right side of the road." Abel, his face pale, was consulting a map. "We should be able to see narrow alleys soon. If we enter one, that monstrosity can't follow."

"On the right, Father?" Esther asked.

"Esther, behind us!" Ion shouted, facing backward.

The armored vehicle's cannon had begun to move. Things were becoming serious.

"Both of you hang on tight!" Esther ordered. The instant a narrow alley entered her field of vision, Esther counter-spun the wheel. At the same time, she braked as if she were crushing the pedal under her foot. Ion's scream was drowned out by the shriek of the oil-pressure suspension. As soon as the Merkaba locked its front wheels and spun around, it turned right at an acute angle. The car kept turning sideways, obeying the laws of physics, but . . .

"Heaven helps those who help themselves. Amen!" The shouting nun cut the steering wheel again. God was being very generous tonight: For a few seconds, the car traveled through the alley on one wheel; then, the vehicle safely regained its traction again. "Well? Now they can't follow us!"

Despite the awful smell of burning rubber, Esther smiled in the rearview mirror. It was impossible for that armored tank to come through this narrow alley. They'd shaken off their pursuers— for now. The left rear door had disappeared somewhere, perhaps pulled off along the way, but if that was the price of their escape, it came cheap. Her passengers' faces were stark white, but Esther pretended not to notice.

They would abandon the car in a suitable place and escape on foot. Once they got to the shore, if they crawled into a cave or something ...

Suddenly, Esther noticed that the priest in the backseat was clutching his stomach, his face twisted in pain.

"What's the matter, Father? You look terrible," Esther worried.

"No, I'm okay. I'm okay," Abel answered in a voice that didn't sound terribly "okay." Cold sweat bathed his tense face.

Could he be carsick? Ugh, he's a thoroughly pathetic man. The nun sighed. "Wait, I'll stop as soon as I can find a suitable place. Let's see, somewhere around here ..."

A roar rang out in the darkness.

"What . . . ?" Esther's survival instinct kicked in and she reflexively cut the wheel before she even consciously perceived the screaming object flying toward the car.

A high-frequency wheel that was revolving at an incredible speed nearly grazed the Merkaba, which had just turned at a right angle. It was a super-oscillating blade that could pierce even a tank's armor. If they were hit directly, the Merkaba would look like a rabbit after a wolf attack.

"Oh, no!" Esther cried.

The goddess of good fortune exacted a heavy price for avoiding the angel of death: The tires gave out, bursting with a loud popping sound. The scout vehicle rolled upside down, showing its belly. Sliding along the stone pavement, it shot out sparks as it skidded before finally striking a warehouse wall and stopping.

"Ugh." Esther shook her head, blinking stars out of her eyes. *If I may say so myself, it's strange that I'm still alive.* Normally, she would have made a cross and given thanks to God, but in an overturned vehicle, that never occurred to her. Instead, she extended a hand to the unmoving boy in the passenger seat. "Your Excellency ...Your Excellency, are you all right?"

"Ooh ... Ugh." A weak groan came from his lovely mouth. His wound seemed to have opened again: There was considerable blood loss.

Meanwhile, Abel, having been thrown from the backseat, was outside the car, lying there unconscious. He didn't seem to have any external wounds.

Esther kicked her window, which cracked like a spiderweb, and then she tried to wriggle out of the car.

After a remarkably ear-splitting sound, the smashed door disappeared. "We meet again, vampires!" Petro raged.

As Esther pondered the absurd degree of supernatural strength it must've taken to peel off the side of the vehicle, someone dragged her out by her collar.

A monk in an ash-colored robe had picked Esther up by the scruff of her neck as if she were a stray cat. "Hmm? Aren't you that girl . . . ? You're the nun from the report."

His eyes were hidden by a helmet, but the smile that stretched across his lips was not friendly in the least.

"Chief Inquisitor!"

"Oh, you know me well, girl." Brother Petro grinned in admiration. But Esther wasn't an idiot—armored cars and squadrons of special police had led her to the rather obvious conclusion.

"Indeed, I am Brother Petro, Chief of the Department of Inquisition. Answer directly: Who are you? Why would a human help a vampire?"

The special police came swarming up and wrenched open the Merkaba's passenger door. They had silver chains in their hands, probably intended to bind Ion.

It's the end, Esther despaired.

"Would you kindly take your hands off her, Brother Petro?" Abel weakly asked. The priest stood tottering on two feet, his face was as white as a corpse—but he gripped his beloved percussion revolver tightly in his right hand.

"Hmph. Father Nighthead," Petro snorted in recognition, not sensing any threat whatsoever. Sneering, he said, "I thought you'd taken your good and wounded self to recover quietly in a hospital."

"Wounded?" Esther repeated suspiciously. As she gazed at Abel's pale face, the light of understanding gradually dawned in her eyes: He'd been coughing for the past few days, and he'd been so lethargic when he'd fought Radu at the pier ... "Impossible!"

"What, you didn't know, girl?" Petro shrugged and peered at the nun, who trembled, aghast. "That man's body should be shattered by now. Considering that I ruthlessly smashed his ribs and internal organs during our last fight, he's doing well to stand on his own feet."

Stunned silence met those words. Esther's eyes opened wide; she looked like she'd been sucker punched.

"Enough," Abel said. "Let the girl go, Brother Petro."

"You're certainly spirited for being at death's door. Very well. There are all kinds of things I have to ask *you*!" Petro grinned. Instantly, he dropped Esther, who screamed as she fell to the ground; meanwhile, the Chief Inquisitor's nimble body flashed forward as fast as the wind.

Gunfire blazed toward the silver-white gale charging at Abel, but all the bullets ricocheted. The Chief Inquisitor's scornful laugh echoed behind his armor's four shields, which deployed like strange blooming flowers.

"Powerless, aren't you, agent?"

A strange metallic sound rent the night air. The hammer's high-frequency wheel twisted, heading on a collision course for Abel's head.

But the priest instantly sprang up. His arm moved with deftness, catching Petro's hand from a small gap between the shields – but that was as far as Abel got, because he couldn't raise his arms. He coughed violently, folding his body in half as if caught in invisible talons. Reddish-black liquid leaked from him.

"Divine punishment!" Petro's shields roared, striking Abel's stomach. They shredded the priest's profile as he bent backward.

Spewing blood, his tall body was flung far away.

"Father!" Esther screamed.

The collision looked hard enough to snap the priest's neck, and when the priest's body struck the ground, it rolled repeatedly.

His silhouette stretched out on the stone pavement, a red puddle slowly spreading beneath it.

"Father Abel!"

"Secure them," Petro commanded as he glared at the fallen priest. "I have many questions for them. Inject that vampire with silver nitrate solution, and move him carefully – absolutely do not let him die until I'm done questioning him."

"No, he'll die here," interrupted a voice as chilly as night fog.

The next instant, the six-wheeled armored vehicle, which exceeded ten tons in weight, exploded. A second blast burst the machine into millions of tiny pieces with a loud roar.

Under his helmet, Petro's eyes opened wide. "What's that?"

What happened?"

A soldier pointed and called out in warning, "Chief!" Then, he spotted it: A huge shadowed vehicle, growling like a mountain, stood tall amid the rising black smoke. The tank's engine rumbled once.

"A Goliath?" Petro whispered, gulping. He wondered why the late model battle tank was in a place like this, when it should've been stationed at the airport.

"You're some failure, aren't you? Can't even kill a vampire properly." Standing next to the tank's still-smoking cannon, the slender shadow let out a sarcastic laugh.

Esther knew that face, and she recognized the familiar scent of chewing tobacco. "Baron Luxor!"

"Good evening, sister—sorry for the other day," Radu laughed. The tobacco suddenly ignited in his mouth. "You managed to hide pretty well these last few days. I suppose you've tired of babysitting such a burdensome boy now?"

"Burdensome boy? Baron, you're such an a—!"

"You're the Efreet!" Petro shouted. As if his armor was linked to God's wrath, the four manipulators on his suit opened. With fire reflecting in his eyes, Il Ruinante, the strongest knight in the Vatican, let anger flow through his whole body. "Not once, but twice—how dare you endanger my subordinates?"

"Oh, settle down. I'm not your opponent." Radu glared coldly at Petro while the battle tank at his side changed direction. "Here, this toy is well suited to you, enjoy it to the fullest."

Raising the oil pressure, the cannon's turret turned toward Petro and the remaining Carabinieri.

"You hijacked the Goliath's computer?" Petro murmured.

"Department Chief, look out!" called a policeman.

Both machine cannons rose up, not unlike rearing cobras, and a dense rain of depleted uranium rounds, which could pound even a tank's armor into a honeycomb, poured down on the Chief Inquisitor and his Carabinieri. Petro's shields protected him, but not one of his soldiers could withstand the onslaught. The machine shells blew off their heads and cut their torsos in half. Those who were struck directly burst apart like water balloons.

"No! Retreat, retreat! Damn you!" Spitting blood and curses, Petro brandished his hammer. He'd lost two shields to the cannon rounds, but his body, protected by his Garb of the Lord, was completely unharmed. "How dare you harm my subordinates?"

Petro eagerly waved his hammer like an angry giant. Rotating at high speed and following its wire guidance, the high-frequency wheel smashed the Goliath's right gun turret. "I will not forgive you for this trespass, vampire!"

The knight twisted his wrist again. The wheel that had smashed the right gun turret now severed the left machine gun, mowing down Radu's shadow, as well.

"Got you!" Petro cried with pleasure.

In that instant, it appeared as though the beautiful vampire had been obliterated. The scant surviving policemen cheered, and the high-frequency wheel returned to its master's hand, having splendidly finished its job.

Hefting the hammer, Petro howled triumphantly. "Ha, damned vampire!"

"Hmph. Not bad, but . . ." The snap of fingers sounded beside the Goliath. "I don't know how things work here, but in the Empire, we call the last one standing the winner!"

Petro's eyes bugged out when he spotted the thin shadow of his opponent materializing under the soft gaslight.

"Damn, he used haste mode—ahhh!"

A deafening rumble thundered. The next instant, Petro's body flew backward as if struck by an invisible fist.

Goliath's main cannon spouted fire. It was impossible for even such illustrious armor to protect from a direct hit of that nature: Petro struck the wall of a warehouse, slid down, and remained motionless.

Radu chuckled while gazing lovingly at his tank. Then, he dropped his gaze as if suddenly remembering something: The small, prone shadow beside the flattened Merkaba caught his attention.

"Ion ..." For an instant, Radu assumed a miserable expression. A moment later, however, a blue-white flame floated up in the Efreet's hand, and Radu bent his arm to throw the fireball toward his former friend with an elegant motion. "So long, my tovarich."

Flames lit up Radu's features—but it wasn't the light from his fireball. A gunshot had roared past, directly striking the fireball and smashing it to pieces before it could reach Ion.

Radu glared at the panting nun, who stood there trembling, her gun muzzle still raised. "Worm, don't hinder me!"

Esther pulled the trigger again, but her target disappeared like a phantom. She searched for him frantically.

Then, a voice from behind her growled: "A mere Terran!" With terrible strength, Radu flipped her shotgun away before also striking Esther to the ground. Then, he grabbed her by the throat, lifting her with his right arm to look her directly in the eye. A blue-white light surfaced from his left palm. "Die!"

As the flames bleached Esther's face white, she instinctively closed her eyes.

But before he could throw it, the fireball split open in the Efreet's hand, fractured into dozens of small pieces, which scattered across the cobblestones.

Radu's eyes widened. A blue-white light had struck down his fireball. *Lightning? That's crazy. Lightning doesn't run sideways!* Radu turned his head, following the light's afterimage. When he saw the source of the light, he let out a small gasp.

The silver-haired priest was lying on the ground like a pile of rags. His cassock was cruelly ripped, and he lay there like a corpse—but something was causing his body to give off a faint light.

"Blood . . . ?" Radu whispered, seeing red liquid slide along the cobblestones, gathering up red drops here and there like an amoeba, and rushing like a river toward the priest.

It was blood, but not just any blood—the blood flowed from Ion, who also lay crumpled on the ground, and it was being sucked toward the priest.

"What's happening?" Radu gulped, carried away by an emotion typically foreign to a Methuselah: fear.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 02 eight-percent limited activity — authorized."

Instantly, a huge pillar of lightning burst toward the night sky.

V

White light ripped the night sky, and massive, pitch dark wings burst forth from the priest's shredded cassock.

"Wh-what is *that*?" The Efreet gulped.

As Abel slowly stood, the vampire was reminded of an ill omen regarding a butterfly that grew wings while in its chrysalis.

Silver hair sparkled around the crown of the priest's head, the soft, shiny strands reflecting the flames. In his right hand, he grasped a double-bladed scythe, darker than night itself. Stranger still, Abel's eyes had turned the color of blood. Black and colossal, a pair of double wings spread from the priest's back.

"Are you an angel or a devil?" Radu asked breathlessly.

Abel casually glanced at the flames. Then, he dropped his gaze to the cobblestones, where Ion's blood, writhing like an amoeba, was whirling around his feet – and he laughed.

What happened next was a disgusting sight: The jet black wings drooped to the pavement as if they were withering, the tips dipping into the pool of blood. A moment later, the black wings sucked up Ion's blood as quickly as paper absorbing ink. Like an inkblot, the blood spread along Abel's black wings, traveling toward his core.

"Y-you drink Methuselah blood? Wh-what in the world are you?" Radu gasped, furious and afraid.

He released the Terran girl, who was gasping for air, and then he fully opened the secretion glands in his palms as he entered haste mode, allowing him to produce the largest possible fireballs.

Radu's hands emitted countless flames, which attacked Abel from all directions at once. It was physically impossible to avoid a group of fireballs thrown by an Efreet in haste mode; no matter what kind of monster Abel had become, this attack would lead to his charred death.

The creature Abel had transformed into seemed to understand that the fireballs were unavoidable, and so he stood still – except for the violent flapping of his wings toward heaven. That lone maneuver produced lightning resembling a swarm of vipers striking out at helpless mice. The fireballs all scattered, rendered ineffective in less than a second.

Radu wasn't given much time to recover from his shock: His opponent had disappeared. *I'm using haste mode. Why am I unable to perceive my opponent's movements?* The soft hair on the nape of his neck stood up, and Radu's survival instinct kicked in: He twisted his body down and to the side. A few blue strands of hair danced in the night air as Radu retreated, somersaulting away.

His enemy leapt between the shadows cast by the light of the moons and the fires. With cunning silence, the creature gazed down at Radu, its red eyes shining eerily. Without using words, the monster transmitted thoughts directly into Radu's mind: *You are our prey. The scythe swung out to decapitate Radu. We will eat you now.*

The Methuselah – the strongest battle creature on the face of the Earth – shook with fear when he was informed of his demise.

As the scythe swung down, it sounded like the night itself was shattering. In the wink of an eye, the creature's swift and absurdly heavy weapon grazed the top of Radu's head.

"Father!" the nun screamed.

Radu had no time to turn his head toward the voice. He had no time to see the Goliath, which now fired its cannon, charge his way. The only thing he saw was the upper left half of Abel's body as it flew off.

To be more accurate, the flesh from Abel's left breast to his left shoulder neatly vanished. The direct hit from the tank cannon had robbed the creature of his top left half.

Utter silence descended. Abel's red eyes slowly examined the wound. The upper left half of his body had turned into crimson fragments of ground meat, left scattered across the ground.

Even this monster couldn't withstand that hit, Radu thought. But his hope crumbled within the space of one heartbeat: The creature's blood spread over the ground and bubbled up.

No, those weren't bubbles: They were small mouths.

Countless mouths, as small as fingernails, each with fangs the size of sand grains, floated up from inside the blood puddles. Each mouth gnawed at the scattered fragments of Abel's torn flesh. They devoured the scorched meat greedily, as if it were scrumptious. Then, the sated mouths melted into the original pool of blood as if nothing had happened. It was a revolting sight.

Within a few seconds, the scattered body parts were neatly disposed of, and all the blood returned to its owner via his drooped wings. Abel looked exactly as before, except for his cassock, the upper half of which had been destroyed completely.

Radu murmured, "Ridiculous." His teeth were chattering, but he didn't notice. "What the hell are you?"

The pitch black wings flapped toward the sky. Blue-white lightning ran along the black feathers; in the moment it converged upon the scythe, the world was bleached of all color.

The electric shock from the monster's scythe pierced the charging Goliath. As if his nervous system were paralyzed, Radu watched as the lump of iron—which weighed more than fifty tons—was torn apart as if it were made of paper. *It's my turn next*, he gulped.

The harbor, lit up brightly by the explosion, resembled a battlefield covered in blood, flesh, and iron. Nothing living stood or moved. Radu was certain that he alone was looking upon the monster that ruled all nightmares.

This thing will kill me. He accepted his fate calmly as Abel's red eyes gazed down at him.

"Monster . . ." Esther's small voice rang out like a peel of thunder. She sat on the ground, tightly holding on to Ion's unconscious form. The nun stared up at the black-winged fallen angel as if she'd forgotten how to blink. "What kind of monster are you?"

Her innocent question shifted something in that dark, blood-soaked moment.

"Ah," Abel said, opening his mouth for the first time. Finally, something other than hunger filled his red eyes. He slowly turned around, pleading, "Wrong ... Wrong ... I ..."

The nun retreated, shuddering with fear when she saw Abel step away from the Efreet's side. Still holding the boy's body, she shook her head, quaking. "Stop! Get back! Please, stay away!"

"Ah ... oh ..." Abel extended a hand, entreating her. The wings on his back drooped visibly, like withered black rose petals. "Esther, I ... I ... I ..."

Esther shrank, screaming as though her heart would burst.

Abel extended his sharp talons toward the girl. A sharp object, harder than iron, softly touched her tear-stained cheek.

Esther was struck dumb as Abel wiped away her tear. Her mind couldn't endure the excessive fear: Strength drained from the nun's body and she collapsed abruptly, folding over the boy. Both of them lay on the ground, unconscious.

"Ah ... Esther . . ." Abel knelt next to the girl. As if seeking her forgiveness, the creature gently shook her shoulder. He clung to her the way a frightened child would cling to its mother. "Esther ... Esther ... I—"

The air burst around them.

The cannon roared as its shells rained down.

Still shielding Esther and Ion, Abel cried out in pain—if he hadn't spread his wings again to shelter them, the boy and girl would've become blood-colored lumps of flesh. The thirty-millimeter Vulcan shells had enough power to turn a tank into scrap iron.

A special policeman who miraculously had survived gave a cry, looking up at the sky. "It's the Akraziel! And Rufael!"

Floating high above, sharing the night sky with the two moons, two huge ships hovered, each more than six hundred feet in total length. Taking the names of angels who had judged angels, the Akraziel and Rufael were cutting edge, computer-controlled aerial battleships.

The surviving soldier screamed as the two aerial battleships' machine cannons turned smoothly. The ships, which were controlled with the same mechanized intelligence as the Goliath, removed the covers from their cannons without any hesitation whatsoever.

The group of thirty-millimeter machine cannon shells, released at a rate of fifty rounds per second, mercilessly bit into the ground. It was like the end of the world had come when the hot lead gouged into the ground: The concrete wharf was torn apart, and anchored ships exploded one after another, their scraps sinking into the dark waves. The screams of surviving policemen fell silent at once.

"You're uninvited," Abel said, cradling Esther and Ion. He bit his lip, looking toward heaven.

Beside the Rufael, which continued sweeping the area with its machine cannon fire, the Akrasiel's broadside guns slowly changed direction, finally setting its sights on Abel. Even if Abel could withstand machine cannon fire, he couldn't protect the boy and girl.

Suddenly, the sound of thunder rumbled across the sky. Flames from a series of explosions lit the night as bright as day, and the atmosphere swelled with heat. As the storm of light and sound burst, the airships' cannon shells suddenly ceased.

Abel raised his head, narrowing his eyes. A swirl of boiling light shined directly into Abel's field of vision, and the Akrasiel fell to the sea, its jet black air bladder spouting red-black flames. Next to it, the Rufael's gas turbine engines roared to life as it tried to flee from the shock of the explosion. Its huge, demonic shadow was awe-inspiring.

Higher still, however, hovered an aircraft that dwarfed the Rufael. A pure white aerial battleship dominated the night sky, as if it owned the moons and the heavens.

"Iron Maiden II — Kate!" The instant Abel shouted, a laser flashed from the white airship, mercilessly harpooning the Rufael's broadside turrets.

The huge ash-colored ship fell to the sea, following the fate of its consort ship. A beat later, the sea surface swelled and a final explosion thundered.

VI

By the time the Iron Maiden II finished picking up the wounded and left the harbor, the date already had changed.

"All the special police who were here are dead. The Department of Inquisition staff within the city of Carthage is nearly annihilated." Sister Kate's voice was bitter. The hologram of the nun on the bridge flickered faintly as she tilted her head. "So, Abel, what about Baron Luxor?"

, "I don't really know," Abel replied, shaking his head — perhaps he had escaped, wounded. Although Abel wore a dire facial expression, not one wound was evident on his body. "I think he was probably caught up in the bombardment, but I'm not certain. Ion, did you see?"

"No, I was unconscious. I'm so ashamed!" The boy seated next to Abel moaned in chagrin. Perhaps because the silver had been drawn out or because the blood transfusion had been a success, he'd recovered much faster than an ordinary person would have. Ion gulped a glass of blood restorative; then, he shattered its neck in an outburst of anger. "You didn't find his body?"

"Negative. I didn't find any person resembling Baron Luxor. I assume he escaped," Tres reported from a corner of the bridge. A cable terminal linked with the Iron Maiden II's weapons control system was plugged into Tres' neck. The miraculous ship's accurate attack on the Rufael and Akrasiel had destroyed only the enemy ships, inflicting no damage on the city streets; such precision was due to the skill of this cyborg.

Arms folded, Gunslinger supplemented his own report: "We have failed to find the other Department of Inquisition aerial battleship, Raguel. The companion ship should have

escaped the airport with the Akraziel and Rufael, but there's been no trace of it since the battle."

"Well, what should we do now, Sister Kate?" Abel asked the holographic nun in a strangely quiet voice. *Four hours left until dawn ... if we're going to move, we'd better hurry.*

"This ship is currently en route to Duze Oasis, west of Carthage. The truth is, the ruins of an old church are there, and it's on Lady Caterina's inspection schedule," Kate informed.

"Indeed, if we were to hide Ion in that oasis, they could meet when she inspects it. It's a good plan."

"After the meeting, we'll put Count Memphis aboard this ship again and set sail. If we can get through to the safety zone, we'll charter a ship from there to send him home."

Since the Carabinieri had been destroyed, there was nothing to hinder Caterina's movements. It would be safe if they met the cardinal at noon, then waiting for nightfall before leaving the country.

"Well, we'll try to make the count comfortable until then. How about some tea until we arrive at the safe house? I've developed a new recipe," Kate offered.

A door slid opened in front of Ion, and a teacup giving off fragrant steam gradually came into view.

"Pink rose, marrow, and lemon grass. And I use honey, not sugar.... Abel, won't you have some, too?" Kate inquired.

"No, I ..." Looking out over the desert with lonely eyes, the priest shook his head. His face was whiter than the two moons. Hoarsely, Abel asked: "Urn, Kate, how is Esther?"

"Yes, about that ..." Kate said, stroking her chin with puzzlement, "she still won't get out of bed. When I checked her, though, I couldn't find anything physically wrong with her."

Abel peered out the window again. Perhaps because they'd come south, the second moon looked as if it were much closer. It seemed he could reach out and touch it. He nodded toward its glow, as if he'd resolved on something. "Esther is in the infirmary?"

"Yes. I used the bed in the next room for another wounded individual. . . . Oh, are you going to visit her?"

"If you're visiting, I'll go, too," Ion decided. He emptied his glass and stood. "I don't know what happened, but I'm worried. I just want to see her face."

"If you're going to worry, worry about yourself, you heretic!" Petro roared like a wounded wildcat.

Abel and Ion snapped around: A tall shadow blocked the entrance to the bridge. Petro's right hand, covered in bandages, grasped a huge hammer. His lips were bloody and swollen.

"Brother Petro!" Abel declared.

"Well, at least now I have proof of your guilt, you heretics!" The Chief Inquisitor glared hatefully at them.

After having been hit with a direct attack from a tank cannon, it was strange that this man could so much as breathe. Even if one calculated in the defensive strength of the Carabinieri's suit of armor and the fortified human's will, he shouldn't have been able to stand up for a few months yet.

Speechless, the group before the Chief Inquisitor gaped at him as he roared with laughter.

"Heh heh heh. It's just as Lord Francesco suspected: Sforza was scheming with the vampires after all! What an accursed woman ruling our church! Now, it's time for that damned vixen to pay. I will arrest you all!"

"Tres, stop!" If Abel hadn't interrupted his comrade, Petro's head might have been blasted open in mid-laugh.

"Let go of me, Father Nightroad," Tres demanded as the android tried to peel Abel's hand from his arm, his gleaming double-barreled M13 twitching in his opposite hand. With his finger still on the trigger, Tres coldly added, "He's seen Count Memphis; we can't let that man live. I'll obliterate him here and now."

"Ha! Obliterate me? Interesting! I'm certain you said 'Father Tres,' right? Very well, if there's anything you can do to me, give it a try!" Perhaps inspired by its owner's fighting spirit, the hammer in his hand gave a high-pitched cry. There was absolutely no hint of fear in II Ruinante's face. He twirled his weapon, which was as tall as his own body, with easy precision. "If it's for the sake of holy war, I will neither run nor hide! I normally duel —"

Suddenly, gunfire flashed toward the Chief Inquisitor. The bullets grazed his thin face, gouging six holes in the wall behind him. For an instant, the knight opened his mouth as if shocked; at length, he realized what had happened. He moaned, holding the welts on his cheeks. "Coward! You attack while an honorable knight is introducing himself —"

"Firing angle correction at point zero two. Firing second volley," Tres indicated.

Knocking away Abel's hand, Tres pulled the trigger. Six of II Ruinante's hairs floated up in the air.

"Wh-whoa! You shot again! How sinful for you to shoot without listening to what a person has to say!" Petro declared.

"Tres, please stop! First, we should hear what he has to say —"

"Negative. Father Nightroad, if you interfere with me again, I'll obliterate you, too. Take your hands off me."

The three men bickered as bullets and the hammer carved holes in the walls.

"*All of you, stop it! Don't fight on the bridge! If you must fight, do it outside the ship!*" the nun's hologram shouted in a serious voice, but nobody listened.

As Tres' gun muzzle flipped up, Abel flew to shield the Chief Inquisitor. Meanwhile, Petro's hammer fixed its aim on the killing doll.

"This is God's punishment!" Petro shouted.

"Point zero four seconds late," Tres replied.

A rumble assaulted the bridge, seeming to push it up.

"Wh-what is it?" Ion asked.

"It's like an earthquake," Abel moaned.

The fierce vibrations overturned everything. The bulletproof glass vibrated, and all the lamps on the control console turned red. Abel, rolling on the floor, blurted out more nonsense about earthquake safety maneuvers.

The only one left standing was the android priest, who asked, "What's wrong, Sister Kate? What is causing this turbulence?"

"*Air currents!*" Kate replied.

The hologram, flickering repeatedly, seemed in danger of technical failure. Narrowing her eyes farther, Kate reported as if at the end of her rope: "*An air current suddenly sprang up — it's impossible.*"

"What is that?" Petro asked.

When Brother Petro raised his voice in concern, all of them turned around and gaped: In the depth of the night, the desert was rising up.

The Angel of the Burning Sands

*Even all nations shall say,
"Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land?"*

I

The ground was alive and writhing, and it was as if the atmosphere was moving of its own volition. The air seemed to be full of the very spirit of destruction.

With his hammer still brandished over his head, Petro looked dumbfounded. "Hey, somebody explain to me what the hell I'm seeing?"

"Maybe it's a sandstorm?" Ion guessed. "But it's so huge."

It looked as if the desert itself had risen up to the sky. How could such a sandstorm exist?

A whirlpool of sand was spreading its countless tentacles; the eye of the storm took up more than a one-hundred-fifty-foot radius. From time to time, blue-white bolts of energy flashed in the whirlpool, the friction between sand grains causing electrical discharge. The whirlpool itself pulsed as if it were a living creature, and the air currents this movement produced trifled with the aerial battleship as it struggled to stay in the stratosphere. The ship shook as if it were a leaf on a tree.

"Impossible . . . A thing like that can't physically exist! What in the world could supply so much energy?" Kate wondered over the intercom.

Desert sandstorms were never on a very large scale: They were small whirlwinds produced from the build up of pressure between the chilled upper atmosphere and the heated air near the ground, making them fundamentally different from the low atmospheric pressure that built up great hurricanes over the ocean. However, this sandstorm could rival a typhoon.

"Is this the Iblis? Is the Angel of the Desert still alive?" Abel murmured to himself, his voice trembling violently. He looked like he'd witnessed a ghost rising from its grave. The sandstorm was slowly moving directly to the northeast.

Abel turned around as if snapped and shouted sharply at the nun's hologram: "Please calculate the time until that sandstorm reaches Carthage!"

"I'm already doing it! It will hit in two hundred fourteen minutes, at five a.m. exactly, the same time that dawn breaks!" Kate answered promptly while changing the aircraft's course. If they flew at full speed, it wouldn't take them five minutes to get to Carthage — but what could they do then? Even though the Iron Maiden II was the latest model aerial battleship, it could hold only thirty passengers. They couldn't even save the employees and church workers at the embassy, let alone the people of Carthage.

"The Duchess of Milan's rescue is the first priority," Tres stated, as if he'd read Kate's mind.

"At this time, the destruction of Carthage is already a certainty. Iron Maiden II, it is of no use reporting this to the city of Carthage. If the panicking citizens begin to evacuate, there is the danger that the Duchess of Milan's rescue could become impossible."

"Wait, Father! How can you say such a thing, you Terran?" Ion, who had been watching the storm as if enchanted until then, reacted strongly to Tres' emotionless words. Angry, he said: "You should be ashamed of wanting to stay silent and watch your brethren die!"

"What he said!" Petro sullenly agreed. "Father Tres, you call yourself a church worker? Where is your pride as a servant of God?"

The violent agreement between the inquisitor and the Methuselah was unexpected. They both emphatically nodded. A moment later, Petro blinked, just then noticing that he had supported the opinion of a vampire.

Completely ignoring him, Tres casually pointed out, "Even if they begin evacuating from this very moment, their survival probability is zero. We can't save anyone." Gunslinger, his voice cold and merciless, continued, "I'll add one thing to that, Count Memphis: I'm not a human, I'm a machine. I am incapable of either pride or shame." Ion gaped. "But –

"The three of you, please stop! If you're going to fight, go outside!" the holographic nun shouted. "Huh?" Sister Kate suddenly looked up, noticing something. *"A video message is coming in addressed to Count Memphis. Let's see, the source of transmission is... the Department of Inquisition's aerial battleship Raguel!"*

"Send it to the main monitor," Tres instructed. Because of the state of the atmosphere, there was a lot of static, but there was no mistaking the handsome face beneath blue hair. "Radu! You're alive after all?" Ion cried. *"Hey, is that voice Ion?"*

The blue-haired vampire on the monitor had been badly beaten. Ion almost doubted his own eyes: Radu's lips, which stretched in a hollow smile, were painfully pale.

"Sorry, this ship isn't receiving images. I can't see your face, but . . . well, I'm relieved you sound well," Radu said.

"How dare you!" the boy raged. "How dare you show your face before me!"

"/ seem to be hated." Radu smiled bitterly, but he didn't make any excuses. *"Let's get down to business: Neither of us has any time left to rekindle our friendship. I suppose you've already seen the ace up my sleeve?"*

"That sandstorm?" Ion blinked. "Your ace?"

"The Iblis. It's a decisive battle-use weather weapon made by Terran long ago, in the age when our Methuselah forefathers and the Terran were fighting fiercely. Perhaps I should call it a self-destruct weapon?" Radu's eyes held a strange mixture of contempt and awe. *"The Terran who lived in Carthage back then devised a trap to destroy the city itself in case they lost the war and were occupied by the Empire. That's the sandstorm. I switched on its master unit. Soon, that sandstorm will come to this city, guided by the master unit's beacon. You've already calculated when, yes?"*

As if his expression had been wiped clean, the combination of pain and fatigue disappeared from Radu's eyes, replaced instead with a piercing bloodthirst. *"Ion, surrender obediently. If you do, I'll spare Carthage and the Duchess of Milan."*

"You'd go this far? You'd commit such a filthy act just to kill me, Radu?" Ion asked.

"Of course. Am I not a filthy traitor? You still believed in me, didn't you, even after being betrayed so cruelly? Ah, yes, yes, my friend."

Radu looked down; then, he deliberately snapped his fingers. Suddenly, the monitor went dark, and his face disappeared.

"/// give you one warning: No matter how much you hate me, I wouldn't recommend directly attacking my ship. Here is an image of what lies directly beneath the Raquel," Radu said, transmitting a video caption.

"Th-that building!" Kate gasped, looking at the image on the monitor: a complex and pompous piece of architecture. *"The Vatican embassy! Oh, Lady Caterina!"*

Radu continued, *"If you understand how serious I am, Ion, you should come quietly. There's not much time left."* The screen turned black, making a noise as if something had been broken.

For a while, nobody moved. They all stared at the blanked-out monitor.

The sandstorm showed no sign of calming – far from it.

"The Angel of the Desert," the holographic nun muttered slowly. *"Baron Luxor called it a self-destruct weapon, but what in the world could it mean?"*

"He was being literal, Kate." The silver-haired priest answered Kate's question with a bitter look on his face. "You know the legend of Saint Elissa, don't you?"

"The queen who protected the city of Carthage from vampires? Yes, I know it. ..."

After the Armageddon, the human race clung to the scant few inhabitable places on this planet. And as they fought for survival, they encountered a new enemy: vampires.

This blood-sucking species of intelligent life possessed monstrous strength, and advanced lost technology helped them stabilize their society. With such might, it seemed inevitable that the vampires would defeat the humans, who were isolated in small-scale co-ops and had limited technology.

However just when all seemed lost, a sudden change occurred: Among humans within the relatively large-scale organization of the Vatican, miracles began to occur, one after the next.

For instance, when the church's army was on the brink of defeat, a group of angels suddenly appeared, driving away the vampires. Then, a knight who was heading off to battle saw an advanced weapon made of lost technology suddenly appear before him, as if it were an apparition.

The most famous miracles, though, were bestowed in the form of individuals with strange powers who suddenly appeared everywhere: The Naia Sancta, or black female saint, was granted countless prophetic visions, which she revealed to the Pope of the time, Gregorio XX. Saint Istavan revived enormous electrical power to a deserted village in the east. Saint Nebshehir was said to have destroyed in one night an entire army of vampires that were attacking the Frank Kingdom. And

so on. Considered saints sent by God or incarnations of angels, those talented people inspired many people's faith.

Saint Elissa was among such legendary holy people. An army of vampires had attacked the city of Carthage in the middle of the Dark Age, at the time when Elissa was the Queen of Carthage. The fierce battle went on for three days and three nights, and the citizens resolutely fought the vampires under the queen's command. Then, on the last night, Elissa sacrificed her own life to destroy the vampires, narrowly saving Carthage in the process.

Abel stopped his story and looked up at the moons as if to jog his memory. "There are parts of that story that don't remain in the official records, though. According to Bedouin legends, Elissa didn't think they'd win. Assuming the humans would lose, she was said to have set a trap before the battle, secretly planning to destroy the vampires and the city right along with them. That's probably what the Iblis Baron Luxor spoke of is, Elissa's trap."

Ion, listening fervently to the priest's story, tilted his head. "It's a little strange that I've never heard such a story. Neither the city of Carthage nor anyone named Elissa has ever come up in our history. Father Nighthead, are you certain that legend is accurate?"

"Well, that's—"

"It's useless to assess past data now." A deep monotone interrupted Abel. "I recommend the investigation wait until after the operation is complete." Tres, who'd been closely observing the topography he'd pulled up on a monitor, turned around. "There's no time for discussion. Right now, we must stop the advance of the sandstorm and save the Duchess of Milan and the embassy. We have to formulate a plan quickly."

Kate interjected, "*Agreed. But how?*"

"First, we interrupt the function of the master unit," Tres said.

Radu had said that the sandstorm was guided by the master unit's beacon. So, if they found and destroyed that master unit . . .

"How do we find the master unit?"

"The sandstorm is advancing in what direction?" Tres asked. *"Toward the city of Carth— Oh! So, it's somewhere in the city."* "Affirmative. Furthermore, Dark Age ruins are preserved in only one place." Using the laser sight of his handgun, Tres illuminated the aerial map of Carthage on his monitor. The red beam lit up a cathedral in the old part of town, which was situated right next to the Vatican embassy.

"It's the Queen's Grave under the cathedral! But that place should be completely sealed up!" Kate exclaimed.

"We can get in from the underground aqueducts," Abel said while removing a ragged scrap of paper from his pocket. "This is the map Doctor Borromini had. When I found it, I thought it was for a planned archaeological theft, but now I think he was hired by Radu to uncover the ruins. After we arrested him, Radu was fearful that the intelligence would leak out, so he killed Borromini."

"Then, we can deactivate the Iblis!" Kate cried. "If so, we'd be placing the Duchess of Milan's life in danger immediately afterward." As Tres unemotionally pointed out, Radu wouldn't take it lying down if the Iblis suddenly stopped functioning. The Raguel could turn the Vatican embassy into a mountain of rubble with one bombardment.

"Let's split into two groups," the silver-haired priest suggested, pointing to his map. "I'll stop the Iblis. Ion and Kate, while I'm doing that, it will be up to you to buy time, hindering Baron Luxor somehow."

"You say that like it'll be easy. Baron Luxor is trying to kill Count Memphis, right? And he knows the count is on this ship. I'll have to do something about the Raguel, anyway, as this ship is the only craft equal to her threat. But both Count Memphis and Father Tres are wounded, meaning we don't have enough battle strength to take on an Efreet," Kate worried.

"No, there's battle strength," Ion said, shaking his head and turning around. He looked over at Il Ruinante, who stood there silently, his arms folded and a displeased glower on his face. "Brother Petro," the boy called to the Chief Inquisitor. "I want to borrow your strength."

"What in God's name . . . ?"

Everyone stared at Ion, wondering if he'd gone insane.

But although Ion's face looked pale and cold, a clear light was shining in his eyes. "I value your skills highly; you were equally matched with Radu. Won't you lend that strength to me?"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Looking like a bear awoken from hibernation, the Chief Inquisitor grumbled, "I'm the Chief Inquisitor— your arch-rival. Why should I, of all people, help a vampire?"

The boy nodded. "Of course, I'm not saying you should do it without payment or reward." There was neither pretension nor hesitation in Ion's expression. "When this is all finished, I'll hand myself over to you. How's that?"

"Your Excellency! You mustn't promise that!" Kate hurriedly tried to interrupt.

Abel held up his hand and shook his head silently.

Ion continued his negotiations as if he didn't notice. "Please, won't you lend me your strength? I need it to settle things with Radu."

"Can I ask one thing, Ion?" Petro queried. "What is the reason you want to settle things with that vampire — a grudge?"

"Not a grudge," Ion replied, tilting his head. He spoke as though convincing himself. "That man was my friend. No, even now I think of him as a friend. I don't want my friend to commit any more mistakes."

Looking strained, Il Ruinante crossed his arms. He scowled at Ion. With his hammer grasped tightly in his hands, he seemed to wonder about swinging it down on Ion now, and thereby putting an end to things.

The electrified tension spread over the bridge while everyone waited for Petro to make up his mind.

"Hey, Sister Kate," the monk called.

"Yes? *What is it?*"

The Chief Inquisitor glared balefully at the nun. "Does this ship have an armory?"

"*Hmm? Yes, but what — Are you planning a hijacking?*"

"Guide me to the armory immediately and avoid prattling such foolishness at me!" Petro roared impatiently as he struck the floor with his hammer. "I have to make my own kind of preparations to wrangle with that Efreet."

Kate's eyes became round.

"So then, you'll help!" Ion beamed.

"Don't misunderstand, vampire!" Petro retorted. With a sneer that sharply contrasted the boy's smile, Petro twirled his hammer and thrust it in Ion's face. "I'm not helping you! I'm fighting for the church and the two hundred thousand citizens of Carthage, as well as my murdered subordinates! After I obliterate Radu, I'll come deal with you and all these traitors. Remember that!"

The Chief Inquisitor turned his back on them; his face was colored red, as if he were embarrassed about something. "Well ... We'll have a truce until then," Petro said, sulking.

What was that shaking a little while ago? For some reason, Esther seemed to have fallen asleep again. As she slowly floated up from the bottom of her dreams to the shores of reality, she raised her thin eyelids. Perhaps because it was the first sound sleep she'd had in a long time, her head felt very clear. *But I still want to sleep — if possible, all the time. When I sleep, I can forget everything.*

While distancing her consciousness from the memory of blood and flames, Esther asked herself if she really wanted to forget everything. She worked hard to dive back into unconsciousness. *I don't want to remember. I don't want to think about that winged monster!* In the narrow space between asleep and awake, Esther thought, *I don't want to think. I mustn't think. I'll sleep. If I sleep —*

A knock and a voice hesitantly calling her name pulled her back to reality.

"Um, Esther, are you awake?" Abel asked. Her rapidly awakening consciousness recalled blood, fire, lightning, darkness, and screams.

Stay away! Her eyes were open, but her head was hidden under the blankets. Esther didn't move. She couldn't move. Right outside her door was *that monster*.

"You're still asleep, aren't you?"

That creature sighed, bending its head and looking very lonely. But Esther wasn't fooled. She slowed her breathing. *Go somewhere else, quickly!*

"Well, sorry to bother you. I won't wake you." *Good, that's it — go somewhere else!*

"I don't know if we'll meet again, though, so I'd better tell you now — if I don't, I might regret it. Maybe you can hear me out, even as you sleep," Abel said. Esther's heart screamed.

The priest showed no sign of leaving. Moreover, he began to mumble. There was only one thing Esther could do: She kept her head covered and her eyes shut.

"First, I'm sorry for putting you through so much today. I've reflected on it, and I suppose I frightened you." The priest apologized in a quiet voice. "I know you were afraid. I'm afraid of myself."

Huh? What did he mean by that?

Abel had looked intoxicated by destruction, so how could he be afraid of himself? Esther didn't notice that she was listening attentively to the priest's confession.

"Yes, the other day, you said to me, 'Why are you always goofing off so much?' Well, there's my answer, that thing I become is the reason." There was no sign of the fallen angel Abel had been a few hours ago; instead, he sounded like a man desperately trying to swallow something bitter. It was the voice of that normal, unreliable, people-loving priest. But something lurked beneath the surface. . . . Sadness? Despair? Grief?

His voice was laced with pain, as if he were vomiting blood. "It isn't what you think. The Crusnik isn't the kind of power you think it is. I can't explain in detail, but it isn't a gift or a magical ability—it's more like the mark of my sin."

Abel clammed up for a little while. Then, he confessed: "When I become that, I can't control myself. . . or them." When he opened his mouth again, deep regret was in his voice. "That's why I didn't want to become the Crusnik in front of you. Because I would frighten you away if I used it. Yes, I didn't want to use it."

Abel stood still, and Esther remained motionless, as well. Only the airship's engines could be heard... The awkward silence continued for a while.

"Ah, there's no more time," Abel sighed, as if he'd woken up from a dream. "Please, believe that I wanted to be your friend. No matter what, I want to protect you and Ion. Although maybe you won't believe me, I swear it's the truth."

He sighed softly and turned from the door. She could hear the sound of shoes shuffling down the corridor, and then there was silence.

Still covered by the blanket, Esther didn't move.

She'd accused him of being reluctant to do his part and use his strength. When she'd denounced him in that inn, he'd looked sad but said nothing much to defend himself.

Esther had abused Abel, who'd only ever tried to help her. She'd called him a monster. For the rest of her life, she'd always remember the look on his face at that moment. She'd called him a monster, and then he'd told her he'd like to be her friend. He confessed he was afraid of himself.

Abel was very, very much alone.

"Father!" Esther's body sprang up from the bed "Wait! Father, don't go!"

Abel didn't reply. She put her hand on the doorknob before she looked down and noticed she was clad in lingerie.

"Wh-what the hell?" Finding her freshly laundered nun's habit beside her pillow, she hastily put it on. Running out into the corridor, she collided with a man in a cassock who was just passing by and fell on her behind.

"Ow ow ow! Are you all right, Father Abel?"

"Negative. I'm not Father Nightroad," Tres replied.

Esther's eyes welled with tears.

"Damage report, Sister Esther Blanchett," Tres requested.

"F-father Tres—that was you?" Esther asked.

The priest with short brown hair lifted the girl up.

At last, Esther noticed that he wasn't wearing his usual clothes. "Are you going to war, Father Iqus?"

"Affirmative," Tres answered simply.

From his shoulders hung disposable rocket cannons called "Panzer Faust," which could destroy a tank from a distance of one hundred feet. On his back, he carried a heavy machine gun equipped with a tripod, its ammunition belt wound around his torso. Hanging from his hips were magnetic anti-tank landmines. Fastened to his ankle belt was a knife tough enough to decapitate a water buffalo.

"We're going to Carthage to battle with the Raguel, which is hovering over the city, as well as to stop the vampire Baron Luxor, otherwise known as Radu Barvon. Then, afterward, we will liberate the embassy," Tres informed.

"Embassy?" So, had Abel come to say goodbye a little while ago because he was going to partake in the fighting? "Where is Father Nightroad? Is he going with you, Father Iqus?"

"Negative. He is there." Tres pointed to a small window in the corridor, which looked out onto an ocean of sand below—likely a Bedouin oasis, as crudely built huts and a small well were visible. Standing beside the well was a tall man with silver hair.

"Twenty-five seconds ago, Father Nightroad disembarked. Hereafter, he will undertake a different operation."

After Abel let go of his landing wire, which was reeling back up into the Iron Maiden II, he remained standing in place, staring up at them.

"Why, Father Nightroad?" Esther whispered.

Already, their ship was resuming its flight. The figure of the priest grew distant.

"Why send only Father Abel there?" Esther asked.

"*Father Abel is acting as a detached force,*" Kate's gentle voice answered the girl's misgivings. A surveillance camera on the ceiling pointed toward Esther's face. "*This ship will now engage the aerial battleship Raguel and Baron Luxor in the sky over Carthage. During that time, Father Abel has been put in charge of a different mission, one underneath the city of Carthage.*"

"There was a danger that if we let him off too close to the city, he might be discovered by the enemy," Tres explained.

Outside the window, Abel had long since disappeared from sight.

The blind priest added to Kate's explanation: "Father Nightroad plans to infiltrate the aqueducts from that well and aim for the city underground, on foot."

"Sister Esther, where are you going?" Kate asked. "*I'd really like to set you down in a safe place, but there isn't time for that. During the battle, please stay in your room.*"

"I'm going with Father Nightroad!" Esther insisted. "Please, return to where Father Nightroad is, Sister Kate! I must go with him!"

"I can't allow that, Sister Esther Blanchett." Tres' voice echoed coldly. "Father Nightroad is going to the Iblis' central control system. It's an underground aqueduct that leads to Elissa's Grave. If you were to accompany him, you'd be a burden."

Yes, maybe I am a burden. But even 50 ...

"Please, Father Tres!" Grasping the robe of the priest as he stood there like a pillar of ice, Esther shouted, "There's something I want to say to him! Please!"

Tres turned his emotionless face toward the nun's tear-filled eyes. His lips were firmly shut as he spun thoughts constructed of zeroes and ones.

That's right, he's not a person — he's a machine.

"I can't allow you to accompany Father Nightroad, Sister Esther Blanchett. You have no battle strength. Also, there's no time to turn around," Tres said with an air of finality, ignoring the girl's pleas. "Sister Kate, stop the ship and let her off somewhere suitable. If we take her all the way to the Raguel, she'll likely be a burden there, too." The merciless words struck another blow to Esther's heart.

"*Father Tres! That's going too far!*" Kate cried.

Esther wondered if the android was seriously suggesting they drop her off somewhere, alone, in the middle of the desert, while a sandstorm was approaching.

"Just because she doesn't have any battle strength, that's no reason to —"

"On the contrary, it's dangerous to keep her on board. You must have a copy of the map Father Nightroad brought. Give her that and a weapon for self-defense. Put her on the ground. If she gets into the underground aqueduct, then the sandstorm will pass over her."

"What?" Esther said, thinking: *If I make it into the underground aqueduct?*

Suddenly, her face lit up. "Do you mean, I can—"

"Of course, after you've entered the underground aqueduct, it is none of our concern where you go," Tres stated. "Protect yourself."

The killing machine said nothing more before he casually turned away.

II

Beyond the golden border of the desert, the city was as noisy as a disturbed hornet's nest, notwithstanding that it was the middle of the night.

Learning about the sandstorm from the Bedouins who'd run for dear life from the desert, the people considered escaping the city at first—but every land route crossed through the middle of the sandstorm. The harbor was unusable due to a battle between aerial battleships. The very wealthy owned airships or planes that could use the few remaining air routes, but heading to the airport was in vain, as panicked crowds blocked the main road.

Those who saw the aerial battleship in the sky over the embassy thought they could get aboard it to escape, so a panicked crowd had advanced—but even the Vatican embassy was turning away the people of Medina. People who had run toward the sea also had rerouted toward the embassy when they'd learned that the harbor was unusable, so over time, the noise level became terrible.

"Please don't worry, Your Eminence," Nuncio Bishop Mario Cortonna said as he twirled his walruslike mustache. "I'll accompany you along the secret path to the suburbs we've prepared. Please, let's hurry and evacuate to the airport."

"Please don't make a fool of me, Ambassador," Caterina replied, her eyes flashing. She placed a bookmark in the volume of poetry she'd been reading. Coughing lightly, she glared at the bishop's face. "Who will believe in the Vatican hereafter if we, God's servants, abandon our people to save ourselves? No matter who escapes from here, you and I will remain here until the end." "Your Eminence, I, uh—I-I don't want to die yet!" the bishop declared.

"Oh, what a coincidence. I think all the people crammed out there think the same way, too. Somebody take the bishop to his room," Caterina ordered, "and lock his door carefully from the outside, so he can't interfere with our prayers."

Caterina listened to the bishop's wails, which grew distant as he was dragged away. Then, she fixed her glare on the Raguel, which hovered directly above her building. Named after an angel who'd investigated and judged the sins of other angels in heaven, that craft hovered silently in the air. Red lights blinked along its belly, indicating that the locks on its bomb bay doors were inactive.

"Radu, or whoever it was that communicated before . . ."

Caterina said, glaring at the gunwale cannon tower pointed her way," said he wouldn't inflict damage as long as we don't try to escape, but we'll be swallowed up by that sandstorm if we don't!"

If I could at least contact the Iron Maiden II, I could do something, but . . .

But the Raguel had set up powerful electromagnetic interference, rendering her radio useless. Meanwhile, with the Chief Inquisitor and the Carabinieri having been annihilated at the harbor, the embassy couldn't put up any resistance.

"Sister Loretta," Caterina called.

"Yes, Your Eminence?" The young nun walked forward.

Caterina pointed to the group outside the gate. "Let them into the embassy. They'll get injured out there. Let in the women, children, and elderly first."

"Is it all right to let people like that into the mansion?"

Loretta asked.

"I don't care what propriety demands. Aren't times like this the best chance to convert them to our faith?" Glancing at the gate once more, Caterina coughed quietly. "Besides, if it is the end, then it's our duty to give them peace." Caterina looked back at Loretta.

The nun was peering up at the sky, totally ignoring the cardinal's voice.

It wasn't just Loretta: The other nuns and the crowds packed in front of the gate had stopped shouting and now were gazing up at the southern sky.

"What is it?" Caterina turned to look. When she saw what everyone else was gazing at, she stood suddenly, dropping her poetry book.

In the darkness of the pre-dawn sky, a pure white light flashed. The shining beacon of light grew larger until, at last, a beautiful chalky silhouette hovered above the embassy.

"That's the Iron Maiden II!" Caterina exclaimed.

III

After using exactly ten bombs, Abel was finally able to destroy the final anti-intruder attack module. Breathing harshly, he turned to look back at the road he'd traveled. Illuminated by the light of the chemical fluorescent lamps that covered the walls, the modules, which looked like metallic mushrooms, gave off countless wisps of smoke. Here and there, maintenance droids rolled by; they'd probably inhabited these ruins for hundreds of years.

"No, somebody probably rebooted them?" Abel thought out loud.

In one corner, an empty bottle of wine was marked with the brand name Queen's Tears — the highest-class Carthage wine. Someone had been here recently.

Kicking away the extended manipulators of the deactivated attack module, Abel stepped onto the ziggurat in front of him. His flank had been gouged a few moments prior; now, the wound bled slowly. Strength and energy seemed to be seeping from him along with his blood. As he climbed the stairs, his legs felt terribly heavy.

"Dear me, how pitiful — a monster like me, lagging from such a small wound?" By the time he'd almost finished ascending the tower with drunken, zigzagging steps, Abel's face had turned chalky white.

Having made it to the top platform, the priest whispered quietly, "System, can you hear my voice?"

He opened the cover to the countdown timer and placed it next to the console. The clock read four forty in the morning. He had about twenty minutes left.

"System, what is your current input mode? I need to switch to voice mode."

Smoothly but coldly, an inorganic voice responded: *"System, roger. System user, input command. The task now executing mil resume in parallel time."*

Abel recited the "spell"—as those who were unfamiliar with lost technology would have called it: *"Request System switch to administrator mode. My code is —*

"Code input unnecessary. Performing palm-print scan. System administrator, please place your right hand on the console in front of you."

In a corner of the console, a light about the size of a notebook switched on. Abel took off his glove and softly rested his right hand there.

"Scan commencing. Complete. Administrator confirmed: National Air Force Red Mars Project Peace Protection Supervisory Department Commander Abel Nightroad, Recognizance Agent UNASF 94-8-RMOC-666-02AK."

Dim lights began to adorn the ziggurat until it was lit up like a Christmas tree. After he took his hand off the console, Abel resumed talking to the computer: *"System, request switch to administrator mode. Freeze executing current task. After that, self-destruct."*

"Switch to administrator mode is denied. The user's password does not meet administrator qualifications."

"What?" Abel gasped.

For the first time in ages, something other than pain and fatigue showed on the priest's visage. Until that moment, he'd been stooped over as if exhausted, but now he stood up straight and faced the console.

"System, reconfirm password. This should be the highest class of password," Abel argued.

"System, roger. Commencing reaffirmation. Complete. System here. Request to switch to administrator mode is denied. The user's password does not meet administrator qualifications."

"Bullshit!"

Abel's fingers moved rapidly across the keyboard, but the monitor in front of him showed no response.

"System, my password should free all the gates in RMP-net. This is impossible! Reconfirm once more. Tell me the reconfirmation sequence in detail!" Abel demanded.

"System, roger. The reconfirmation sequence ..."

A pause.

Abel's blue eyes narrowed suspiciously when the synthetic voice suddenly went silent.

"What's wrong, System?" asked Abel. *Is it frozen?*

Its other functions were operating normally. The countdown of the Iblis was still underway.

"System, answer me! Cancel switching to administrator mode," Abel stated.

"Exit." The synthetic voice began talking in its careful monotone again, spinning out words smoothly now, as if its previous malfunctioning had been an act. *"Executing forced replay of video file."*

"Forced replay? Is this a virus?" Abel clucked his tongue and put his hands to the keyboard.

"Good morning, Abel," said a gentle voice in his ear. That voice made him think of sunshine reflecting brightly off the surface of a stream.

"It's four forty-eight, very early for a sleepyhead like you."

There was silence again.

Abel looked as though he would burst into tears or go howling mad. The priest bit his lip like a child waiting to be scolded. He extended a hand, but then he lowered it as if he suddenly thought better.

He slowly looked up to see a woman standing before him.

She looked the same age as Abel, perhaps a little older. Her red hair was swept up, revealing her brown face and her shy-but-winning eyes, which reflected a strange golden hue. A bindi was affixed to her forehead, and one loose piece of cloth, a local garment called a sari, was wrapped around her body; such fashions were lost to history now.

"Oh, it's impossible for you to rise this early — don't tell me you've been up all night? You came to this planet, so you'd better adjust to the twenty-four-hour life rhythm," Lilith teased.

"I have. I'm not a child," Abel said, scratching his cheek and feeling slightly awkward somehow. That didn't stop his eyes from gazing at his companion's face with longing. "How many years do you think have passed since then, Lilith?"

The woman called Lilith—or rather, the hologram of the woman called Lilith—made no reply.

This computer seemed to have primitive artificial intelligence that could change its greeting to match the startup time, but it didn't seem able to incorporate a person-to-person interface, let alone a pseudo-personality reproduction program. The gently smiling woman wasn't even gazing at Abel's face.

"It's a shame—if you're seeing this file, it means Tunis has fallen. Was Lieutenant Elissa Dar Shrite able to retreat safely? She's stubborn about things like that, which makes me worry. She hated you people very much; that's why she prepared the Iblis."

Lilith sighed deeply. Her image, elaborate enough for Abel to imagine he could almost feel her body heat, shook its head sadly. *"Truthfully, I didn't want to set it up. But if Tunis and the oil-field areas were to fall into your hands, well—Western Europe is only a stone's throwaway. Lieutenant Shrite and I were able to revive only this city, but we'd still rather bury it with our own hands than let it become yours. Of course, the lieutenant agreed with me on that sentiment—but, Abel ..."*

He could barely hear her sigh. Her eyes still weren't turned toward Abel, but even so, it was obvious she was talking to the silver-haired young man.

"Elissa and I made a bet that, even among your kind, there was still hope—that you still had a human heart. So, when you came to invade Tunis, we set up a stop code based on one condition," Lilith explained.

"Condition?" As if he'd forgotten that she was a hologram, Abel leaned forward. Almost painful exhaustion showed in his eyes. His expression was startlingly close to the one Lilith wore.

"Yes, a condition: saving even one of the people left in the city—one of the ones you call Terran. If you've already killed all the people, Elissa wins the bet, and you and the Methuselah who attacked this city will all sink to the bottom of the sands. But if one human lives, that will be enough. If you don't kill that one Terran—whom we know you hate—I win the bet, and the Iblis can be stopped."

The beautiful woman smiled coyly. *"Bring the Terran here for a palm scan. The system has been set up to show the command to stop the Iblis after the genetic information from the scan is confirmed. The stop code will not appear for a Crusnik or a Methuselah—only a Terran can save you, Abel."*

Why did her gaze look beyond him? It was torture.

The hologram opened both arms as if to kindly embrace him.

"I know you love this world. Although you make an enemy of it, that's simply another way of showing your love for it. Because you love, believe, and hope for the best, you can't stand it when you think you've been betrayed, which is why you've made an enemy of the world. Even so, you still love it. There's a part of you that could never hate it."

The image shook violently. White noise mixed in with the audio, and the photons that made up Lilith's image gradually began to dissolve around the edges.

Briefly, it returned to light, and the gaze of the beautiful woman finally looked into Abel's eyes. "*Abel, this world is not your enemy. . . .You can start over any time. Don't forget that.*"

"It's too late, Lilith," Abel muttered.

The darkness and silence returned, and the counter read four fifty – ten minutes until the sandstorm arrived.

"All of it was too late, for both you *and* me!"

Abel's hand drew the gun at his hip. Without looking behind him, he aimed over his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

A roar.

Then, one more shot.

A second roar.

And one more shot.

A third roar.

He fired off" three more shots in succession.

Three more roars.

The shadows that had snuck up behind him fell to the bottom of the ziggurat – their shoulders, elbows, and cheeks shot through.

"Sorry, but there are no Terran here. Those are the only life forms here besides me."

Abel wore an expression that was half amused and half depressed.

The three shadows he'd shot down jumped up as if nothing had happened to them. He saw their military coats, gas masks, and helmets – and the long fangs that peeked out from below their broken masks.

"Heartless . . . Methuselah corpses." Muttering, Abel waved his hand, dropping his pistol's empty cylinder to the floor before inserting a fresh one.

The Auto Hunters were advancing. They leapt, flashing talons about as long as short swords. The next instant, their shadows disappeared as if they'd been wiped away.

"Haste mode. Fantastic."

The sound of gunfire overlapped Abel's sarcastic grumbling – six shots pierced his left breast, making wet noises upon impact, the spray of blood dirtying the sainted woman's monument.

As he emitted a low moan, Abel dropped his percussion revolver to the stained floor with a loud clink. Smoke rose from its barrel.

He was pushed down the ziggurat.

Three shadows gathered over him and held down their prey. Each Hunter's fangs bit into him – piercing his neck, shoulder, and torso.

"Ugh!" Abel's eyes turned vivid red.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 02 forty-percent limited activity – "

His lips suddenly stopped moving, but he sighed tiredly, as if he'd lived a thousand years. His eyes regained their ice blue clarity, and a strangely vacant smile appeared on his face as the vampires sucked his blood.

"Maybe this is a good thing," he murmured.

No matter what he did now, it was no use.

If what Lilith had told him was true, only a Terran could stop the Iblis. There was no way he could bring a Terran here in less than ten minutes – such things were impossible unless you were God.

Yes, the catastrophe could not be averted.

Starting with Caterina, two hundred thousand lives would be lost, and the city would be buried at the bottom of the desert. Ion also would be killed. Immediately, war would

break out between humans and the Empire. In the end, everything he'd done had been in vain.

I'm tired, so terribly tired.

He was exhausted.

Maybe it's not so bad to let everything end here.

He shouldn't harbor any more regrets. He shouldn't frighten people or be frightened of people anymore.

Actually, somehow, it's very soothing, letting everything go like this. . . .

Suddenly, a fierce white light pierced the dark gloom that had been slowly dragging Abel toward his death. He could hear Esther's voice scolding him: "Father, are you shirking your duties again?"

IV

"What are these things?" Petro asked. Merely flexing his wrist, he countered an enemy's attack. II Ruinante's reputation wasn't for nothing.

In this case, however, his opponents were extremely unskilled. Petro's current partner managed to dodge the howling hammer by a few millimeters, the evil weapon grazing his gas mask. The hammer swung down, striking the ground. But if they had been on solid footing, the blow would've delivered a nasty shock. The airship's air bladder was made of bulletproof fibers, though, so the hammer simply bounced back.

II Ruinante's body flew backward.

"Aim for four o'clock, Brother Petro," Tres advised.

Petro thrust his weapon behind him and diagonally to the right. The hammer made an ear-splitting noise as it deflected an Auto Hunter's battleaxe.

"You have my gratitude, Father Tres! Thanks!" Petro called out.

"Negative. Can you hear me, Iron Maiden II?" The blind priest lightly slid one step backward. The enemy's ax barely grazed his cassock. Although unable to see, Tres easily pulled the trigger.

With the top of its head blown off, the Auto Hunter fell to the city streets far below. A thin red line of blood trailed down after it.

"Come in, Iron Maiden II. Haven't you finished hacking into the Raguel yet?"

"Give me a little more time, Gunslinger," Kate pleaded.

Whatever was jamming their radio signals was very strong. The body of the Iron Maiden II was floating a mere fifteen feet above the air bladder of the Raguel. Although it was such a slight distance, terrible static poured out of the earphones, overlapping Kate's voice.

"I don't know who set up the virus, but they seem skilled. I need just a little more time."

"Hurry. Aside from myself and Brother Petro . . ."

The knight gave a war cry and smashed three Auto Hunters—only five were left.

When the fourth Hunter jumped up over Petro's head, the monk thrashed it to pieces.

Tres turned his unseeing eyes toward the bow of the ship. "Battle there will be a disadvantage."

At the tip of the air bladder, a short figure held up its sword. "Radu!" Ion bellowed.

Kicking off the air bladder, Ion shot toward his enemy. A few strands of blue hair danced on the night breeze as Radu flashed away, avoiding a sideways blow.

But the blue-haired young man gave a sarcastic smile and turned into Ion's stroke. The blue-white sparkle of napalm flared in both hands.

"Crap!" Ion swung his sword, relying completely on his intuition to strike.

But the flames were no more than distractions, allowing the Efreet to vanish and then reappear behind the boy.

Ion tried to escape by jumping sideways, but...

"It seems you're still not well," Radu whispered, sneering. He caught the boy's thin shoulder. The stench of burning flesh filled the darkness.

A scream of pain spilled from the proud Boyar's lips.

Brother Petro turned around, momentarily distracted by Ion's pained scream "Oh, no!"

"Negative! Concentrate, Brother Petro! Aim for six o'clock!" Tres ordered.

Tres destroyed the seventh Auto Hunter by piercing its heart. His warning had come too late, however, and the blade of a battleaxe sliced Petro's back. II Ruinante stumbled with a brief cry of distress. Still off balance, his body rolled toward the edge of the tilted air bladder.

Following Petro, Tres also slid down to the top of the air bladder. He shot at the Auto Hunter who'd attacked Petro, killing it. Its headless body fell into the street below. That was the last one.

Tres narrowly managed to catch Petro by the scruff of his neck, preventing the monk from falling overboard. The android's other hand, which already had thrown away his handgun, gripped the edge of the air bladder.

"It seems your friends can't help save you." Radu laughed darkly as he squeezed Ion's wounded shoulder with a tighter grip.

The boy was frenzied, but Radu's viselike fingers ate into the bone and pinned the boy motionless.

"Why, Radu?" Ion hissed from between his clenched teeth. "Why did you betray me?"

"I told you: You were an eyesore, Ion Fortuna." For some reason, Radu looked as though he were crying. "Her Majesty's favorite retainer, the great noble with the perfect pedigree—you dazzle everyone. No one notices me. So, in my despair, I wanted to kill you. I wanted you to suffer wretchedly. That's all."

"Radu, don't lie to me." Although his flesh was being burned, Ion continued to talk: "How many decades have we spent together? Did you think you could fool me with such a stupid lie? You're full of shit."

"I'm not lying," Radu bluffed. "I hate you. I wanted to demean you. That's all this is."

"Wrong! If you want to demean me, why did you want those Terran soldiers to kill me in the mansion? Why not kill me yourself? Instead of concocting such an elaborate plot, you simply should have killed me and made it look like a Terran did it!"

The smile disappeared from the Efreet's face. His mouth tightened and his jaw clenched.

His face twisted in pain, Ion continued to accuse his friend: "Think again, Radu. If you stop all this now, I'll keep the whole incident to myself! Stop the Iblis! Please, tovarich. I don't want to fight you anymore!"

Tovarich—the word for "comrade." The instant Ion used that word, Radu sighed.

"I can't do that, Ion." Fierce anger and bottomless sadness reflected in the taller vampire's eyes. "It's too late. How can I turn back now? You'll die here, and the Terran's city will sink beneath the sands! Yes, I'm already past the point of no return!"

"Radu, you idiot!" For an instant, blood spurted between the two Methuselah.

Radu's hand grasped a blood-smeared chunk of Ion's flesh. He stood there, eyes wide at the unexpected sight.

Twisting, Ion had ripped out his own shoulder muscle and thrust his free hand into Radu's chest. "Ugh!"

"Your heart is in my hand," Ion whispered, desperately trying not to faint. Radu's flames had cauterized his flesh, so the blood loss wasn't too bad, and the pain worked to keep him conscious.

"Radu, stop the Iblis!" Ion shouted weakly. "Do it while there's still time!"

Drooling blood from the edge of his lip, the Efreet laughed. "That's outside my jurisdiction."

"What?"

"Another man controls the Iblis. I can't stop it. I know you risked your life, but I can't do as you ask. At least we'll go to hell together, my friend."

The Efreet reached for the boy again. His hands burst into flame and stretched wide to embrace Ion's small body.

It was then that the Raguel, which hadn't moved until that very moment, shook with a tremendous roar.

"Oh, they regained control of the computer? But it's too late. It's no use no matter what they do now," Radu chuckled.

The aerial battleship began to accelerate rapidly.

Yes, no matter what you do now, it's too late. When he dropped his gaze to look at the boy who was gasping painfully beside him, he smiled darkly.

Then, he noticed his shadow, which had formed on the ship's air bladder.

"Damn, this ship is . . ." Radu's neck snapped around. He turned in the direction the Raguel was advancing.

The eastern sea was sinking into the bluish blackness. The sun broke over the horizon.

"Dawn!" Radu cried.

Unobstructed UV rays assaulted the wounded Methuselah, the bacillus in his body boiling at the first streaks of sunlight.

With a voiceless scream, Radu clawed at his throat. His hands were covered in ugly blisters. The bacillus, its activity unusually accelerated by the UV, began eating away at the host's body cells. Blisters spread over the Efreet's entire body, worsening around any skin that was exposed.

"Ion!" Radu looked for the other Methuselah.

Still crumpled on the air bladder, the boy's body also was burning up.

Staggering, the blue-haired Methuselah stretched out a hand toward the boy. He embraced Ion, shielding the boy from the light. Keloids spread across his agonized flesh.

Suddenly, the Efreet's body was thrown back as if punched by an invisible fist.

He'd received a direct blow from a hurled hammer. Radu stumbled toward the stern. A hail of bullets rained down on him, mercilessly striking Radu's wounded body.

As he slowly fell toward the ocean surface, gunshots rang in his ears. The last image reflected in Radu's melted retinas was the Chief Inquisitor screaming as a short priest ran toward his tovarich.

After confirming that the blue-haired vampire had fallen into the swelling sea, the android began to sprint: Ion's body was seizing.

The priest pressed his earpiece as he ran. He gave clear orders to the Iron Maiden II, which floated above the Raguel. "Iron Maiden II, lower the wire! Count Memphis' damage is at a lethal level. Hurry, prepare medical treatment!"

Something bolted past Tres. By the time the android's auditory sensors picked it up, Brother Petro had gone into haste mode to get near the wounded vampire.

"Open the hatch, Sister Kate!" the monk shouted. Picking up Ion's unconscious form, the Chief Inquisitor shielded the boy's body from the sunlight. "If you don't hurry, the boy won't last! Why are you hesitating?"

"Y-yes!" Sister Kate responded.

The landing hatch slowly opened. Petro's sturdy legs kicked the air bladder as he strode the last fifteen feet inside the ship.

"How's Count Memphis?" Kate asked.

"He's still alive. We can save him if we treat him immediately," Petro said, carefully laying the boy's body on the floor. II Ruinante's face was pale from overusing the booster, but he didn't show his fatigue. He stood up and mumbled, "Well, I finished off that Efrete to revenge my subordinates. Now, I no longer have a reason to cooperate with you all, right?"

"Affirmative," Tres said as he slowly turned around, his hand on the holster at his hip. Able to draw the M13 at any time, Tres said in a flat voice, "Thank you for your cooperation, Brother Petro."

"Our ceasefire is over," Petro declared, pointing the tip of his Screamer at the boy on the floor. Neither compassion nor kindness registered on the monk's face. The Chief Inquisitor declared to God and all sinners: "I will destroy this vampire. Afterward, I will arrest you all for heresy, beginning with Caterina Sforza. Are you prepared to face the consequences of your actions?"

Tres made no answer except to tighten his grip on the handgun.

Tension crackled in the air.

"In any case, seems Father Nightroad didn't make it in time." The Chief Inquisitor turned his back as though he'd completely forgotten about the vampire. He narrowed his eyes at the still-open hatch.

Far away, the streets of Carthage were wrapped in predawn darkness. There was no sign of the sandstorm weakening as it closed in on the city. Already, wisps of sand began to cover areas just outside the town.

"The Iblis is still approaching. Unfortunately, now is not the time to battle heretics," II Ruinante said, snorting in displeasure. Ignoring both Ion and Tres, he walked toward the hatch.

"Brother Petro?" The boy lying on the floor gazed up at the Chief Inquisitor and spoke weakly.

Petro snorted bitterly. "I should restrain you and impeach Cardinal Sforza, but ... as God's servant, I must go save the townspeople. I'll leave your inquisition for another time. I'll burn you all at the stake personally – it's a promise."

With that as a parting remark, II Ruinante jumped from the hatch and onto the Raguel.

V

The cone-shaped object hit the Auto Hunter that was gnawing on Abel's side and kept going until it hit the wall, exploding in the next instant.

All vampires had their weak points. The brain stem, the neck bones, the heart—if any of those were severed completely, nothing could revive a Methuselah.

The remaining two Auto Hunters jumped off the priest. Even without sentient intelligence, they knew their companion had been slaughtered in an instant.

But Abel wasn't paying attention to them. "Esther...?" Not bothering to wipe up the blood that seeped from his body, the priest gazed up at the nun, amazed.

Her blue-and-white habit somehow looked miraculously pure in this darkness. In contrast, she gripped a rocket launcher that was still belching smoke from its firing tube.

"Are you all right, Father?" Esther ran up to the fallen priest and peered into his eyes, looking worried. "Are you hurt? Can you stand?"

"Y-yes." Reeling, he got up.

"Good..." Esther's expression softened, as if she were relieved. But that didn't last. The girl glared hard at her companion. "Father, what are you doing?"

"Huh?" The priest reflexively straightened up.

"Don't give me 'huh.'" Esther put her hands on her hips. "Have you completed your mission already? Playing with a bunch of zombies like that, you must have plenty of spare time, right?"

"N-no, that's—"

"Just as I thought! Really, this is what happens the minute I take my eyes off you?"

"Sorry."

Holding up a finger, Esther said angrily: "Rather than apologize, why don't you finish the job at once? I'll help you."

"Sure, but . . ."

"But what?"

Even with this girl's help, I'm still a monster and a cursed sinner. Just hours ago, right before her eyes, I . . .

"Ah, yes! I forgot to mention one thing." Esther averted her eyes from Abel's glum expression. "Father, I followed you because there was something I wanted to tell you."

"Eh?" *Something she wants to tell me? What could it be?* Forgetting both the counter ticking off the time on the monitor and the Auto Hunters waiting for a chance to strike, Abel stood in wait, gaping at the tiny nun.

"I'll say it clearly, because I'm not the least bit afraid of a pathetic person like you!" Esther said, her back turned to the priest.

Abel looked bewildered at her unexpected words.

Then, Esther said in a tone that sounded like she was declaring war, "That's right, I'm completely, utterly, not the least bit afraid of the likes of you! No matter what you do, I am not scared of you, Abel Nightroad! I came to say that. Ah, I feel relieved."

The priest silently appraised the girl, unsure whether he should laugh or cry. "Um, Esther . . ."

"Yes?" Esther answered.

Abel bowed his head. "Thank you—really."

"If you have time for such nonsense"—Esther pointed to the Auto Hunters who were sidling closer—"then take care of these guys and finish the job you came to do! I already said I would help!"

"Roger." The priest nodded sharply. "Done!"

The Auto Hunters preparing to jump on Esther blew apart, having been shot through the stomach faster than the human eye could see.

But the Auto Hunters stood up as if nothing had happened, despite the fact that he'd splattered their guts all over the wall. Abel glared at them and said, "Esther, please leave this bunch to me! You can stop that computer there!"

"What can an amateur like me do?" Esther asked.

"You're the only one who can do it! There's no time to explain—just get over there!"

Wary, the Auto Hunters tried to close the distance to the agents.

Once the nun was seated at the control console behind him, Abel instructed her: "First, place your hand on the glowing light on the right side."

"This?" When Esther touched the place as she was told, the monitor unfroze and new text appeared "Father! A lot of strange numbers came out!"

Glancing backward, Abel confirmed the numbers. That was certainly the stop code.

"Good! Now, punch those numbers into the keyboard! Don't leave a single one out. Type calmly so as not to make a mistake, but be quick!"

"Roger!"

It was four fifty-eight. The stop code had so many numbers. Could she do it?

"I can do it in time!" Esther declared as she grappled fiercely with the keyboard.

Abel returned his attention to the enemy. The rest was up to the girl. His job was to guarantee her safety.

Having realized what she was doing, the Auto Hunters were watching Esther closely. Hope and despair struggled before their very eyes. They knew the key was in the girl's hands.

"I won't let you touch her!" Abel shouted, throwing away his gun. The next instant, his eyes had turned clear crimson. "Nanomachine Crusnik 02 forty-percent limited operation—authorized!"

Black lightning twirled through the air. Several Auto Hunters were thrown upward, trailing red lines behind as their charred flesh stuck to the ceiling.

Traces of consternation appeared in the rest of the Auto Hunters' eyes, which resembled the eyes of dead fish. They retreated, cautious of Abel's newfound strength.

"I sympathize with you poor souls, unable to die or rest," Abel said. "Even so ..." A double-bladed scythe appeared in his hand. "I won't go easy on you!"

One of the Auto Hunters leapt at Abel. Its top half struck the floor—it had been cut in two just below the waist. Its heart completely pulverized, the undead soldier ceased its hellish existence.

Then, the scythe's opposite blade dropped from the ceiling and mowed down another Auto Hunter. This time, Abel's blade was parried with a short sword.

Repelling each other like magnets, the fighters kept their distance. Then, suddenly, as if sensing some unseen cue, they collided head on, the Auto Hunter letting out a war cry.

The priest quietly prayed: "*Deus considers me carba in nomine ... Dono mihi permisum satisfacti...*" This eternally cursed power. This extremely disgusting existence! May this wretched body help me protect the things most important to me now! This is the only power that makes atonement for my sins possible! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, earth to earth. Amen!"

The two combatants tangled together. Blood painted the ceiling red. The Auto Hunter, sliced in two from head to crotch, split apart and plopped on the ground.

Esther, who'd been typing on the keyboard behind him, shouted. "Father, I finished entering it! The time is four fifty-nine!"

With his scythe still in his hands, Abel ran to the console. He peeked over the girl's shoulder. Huge numbers were glowing on the monitor.

"Good, if I input this for the rest..." Abel began typing. After he entered the rest of the stop code, the system would cease. The energy supply to the Iblis would be cut, and the sandstorm would be extinguished before it reached the city.

Abel suddenly noticed Esther was staring up at him.

"Ah..." The priest trembled faintly. He remembered he was still in his Crusnik form: red eyes, long fangs. His whole body was covered in spilled blood, which was a monstrosity in itself.

"It's all right, Father," Esther said calmly. She gently placed her soft hand over the priest's bloody one, which had frozen as it hovered above the "enter" key. "Didn't I tell you that I'm not at all afraid of you?"

The girl pushed Abel's hand down. Together, they pressed the key.

The Empire's Visitor

*Howl, O gate; cry, O city;
thou, whole Palestina, art dissolved:
for there shall come from the north a smoke,
and non shall be alone in his appointed times.
—Isaiah 14:31*

The sun was sinking beyond the desert as they finished settling the details of the envoy's return route to Byzantium.

Caterina coughed lightly, opening the window for the boy who was propped up in bed. Some sand and dust still mixed with the air, but the wind carried with it the refreshing scent of the Mediterranean Sea.

"I'm relieved that the count seems to be in good spirits," Caterina said.

"Thanks to Father Tres' first aid." Ion smiled, pointing with his bandaged hand at the priest who stood in the corner of the room. "Direct sun is fatal for us. If not for his quick thinking, I would have burned to death— By the way, Cardinal Sforza." Underneath the bandages on his face, Ion's expression changed. "Do you know what happened to Radu? Has his body been found?"

"Not yet. We're still investigating. It may have gone out with the tide," Caterina explained. Knitting her slender brows, she shook her head. She wasn't particularly sympathetic to Ion. Baron Luxor had made an ancient weapon run amuck in Carthage; he was regarded as the ringleader who activated the Iblis. But that wasn't all: Notwithstanding that he was an Imperial noble, he also was a member of an international terrorist group known as Rosen Orden. If their influence was spreading not just in human society, but also among vampires...

"We're continuing the search for his body with the help of the Carthage authorities. Please don't worry," Caterina urged.

"Please take care of it. As soon as I return home, I intend to investigate this Orden you spoke of," Ion replied.

"The preparations for your return home should be complete within the week. We'll take you as far as Imperial soil without fail." Caterina took his hand and smiled so as to set him at ease. "But is it really all right for that girl to be our envoy to the Empire?"

Ion answered Caterina with a beatific smile before he shifted his gaze to the window and the noisy courtyard below.

Caterina had opened the embassy as a refuge for citizens who'd lost their homes in the sandstorm. Among the people coming and going between the tents, Ion spotted a tall priest and a redheaded nun distributing blankets.

"It's no use without her," Ion concluded.

"Will these people be okay?" Abel asked, sighing as he looked over the refugees crowding the courtyard. As he gazed at an old woman squatting on the flagstones, he looked worried.

"It was an emergency, but they'll be okay soon," the red-haired nun answered him decisively. Her blue eyes held a kind but strong light as she looked over the refugees. "I think it's very hard to lose your house and possessions, but these people managed to save the most important thing—their lives. As long as they're still alive, they can rebuild."

A boy and a girl carefully carried bowls of donated gruel over to where the old woman was squatting; they were probably the old woman's grandchildren. She thanked them happily, and they began to share their meal.

"Family, friends, companions—as long as people have someone by their side, they can make it through hard times. They can endure anything if they're with a person who cares about them," Esther mused.

"People can be unexpectedly strong when someone cares about them. I know I was."

"You're blushing, aren't you?" Esther glanced up at the priest.

Abel snorted, brushing back his hair in embarrassment.

"Why would a priest blush?" Esther asked.

"Well, it must be because I'm near a person who cares about me," Abel said.

"Certainly, you're near . . . Her Eminence Sforza," Esther stated.

"No, isn't there another person who cares for me? Closer?"

Flabbergasted, Esther stared at Abel. "Sister Kate? Yes. I supposed I'm always causing her plenty of trouble, but she certainly cares about you."

"No, think hard. Aren't you forgetting somebody? Someone closer? More reliable?" Abel asked, twitching anxiously.

Pretending to seriously consider it, the nun clapped her hands. "Ah! Father Tres is a really excellent person! He cares for you as much as a robot can. What are you doing, Father?" Esther asked.

The priest squatted on the flagstone and moaned gloomily. "Oh, God — there's nothing good in my life. My superior works me to the bone, my wallet is thin, and I'm teased by my comrades!"

Esther sighed with all her heart. She was suppressing laughter that threatened to burst out of her.

Yes, no matter how often they're beaten down, even if they despair of their sins, people can walk tall again. As long as somebody is walking beside them, surely they can go on.

"Hey, hey, don't act like a child. Father, if you show me that you can behave properly, perhaps my thoughts might change." Esther laughed mischievously as she tossed a blanket over the priest, who still was moaning obstinately.

Night fell and the warm lights of Medina began to glow.

The signs of catastrophe remained on both the buildings and people, but humans were as stubborn as they were surprising. Within a few months, this disaster would become part of the local folklore.

"Captain, is that baggage loaded?" Puppeteer asked. Like a small child bored with its toy, the handsome young man tossed aside binoculars that had been trained on the twinkling city that lay far away from the pier. His face, which closely resembled that of an angel, turned toward the middle-aged man standing beside him. "If we can depart sooner than scheduled, nothing would be better."

"We finished two minutes ago, Lieutenant," the captain replied. He clicked his boot heels together and saluted respectfully. "Whenever you give the order, the ship is ready to depart."

"Fine. Then, shall we go soon?" asked Puppeteer.

"Of course, sir." The middle-aged man saluted once more, picked up the nearby mic, and pushed the "on" switch of the intercom in a practiced way. "This is the captain speaking. The ship will depart now. All hands to your stations!"

Suddenly, things got noisy.

The long, thin ship resembled a man-eating shark swimming in the night ocean, its command tower a dorsal fin. A bell rang, and the anti-aircraft machine guns were taken in below deck while the gas exhaust and atmosphere intake valves were wrenched shut. The low diesel engine cut off, and the double rectifier motors began to turn, sounding like an insect beating its wings.

While countless orders and reports were exchanged, a junior officer looked up at the control tower shouted: "All gauges normal. Atmosphere evacuation complete. Captain, Sea Wolf departure preparations are complete!"

"Good. Lieutenant Lohengrin, head inside. This ship will now depart. We'll leave the Carthage territorial waters at battle speed number two," the captain declared.

"All right," Puppeteer nodded. "Oh, Captain, be sure to treat that cargo carefully." As the young man crept through the control tower hatch, his black eyes flashed mischievously. "I need him to obey me during the next operation."

The noise of waves hitting the ship grew much louder, drowning out Puppeteer's laughter. The steel ship began to vent the compressed air that had made it float, and the Sea Wolf—the U-boat that was the pride and joy of the Germanic Imperial Navy—aimed for the dark ocean floor and began to cut through the water.